

**The Invention of Mary Shelley:
Fictional Representations of
Mary Shelley in the Twentieth Century**

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of fictional representations of the life of Mary Shelley. As such it forms a contribution to two main areas of study: the postmodern debate about the relationship between fictional and factual discourses, and also to the perception of Mary Shelley in criticism. Chapter 1 constitutes a historical survey of the biographies of Mary Shelley, from her death to the present, which are the factual sources for most of the fictional texts examined in the thesis. Chapter 2 goes on to examine the prose fictions in which Mary Shelley appears as a fictional character in the years from the 1930s to the 1960s. In these we find her determined by her role as wife to Percy Bysshe Shelley, and she is thus presented as the standard heroine of romance fiction. In Chapter 3, study of later prose fictions from the 1960s to the present reveals a figure determined more by her role as author of *Frankenstein*. In Chapter 4, I look at her representation on stage, and show how her persona is determined by developments in late twentieth-century theatre, and she thus becomes beleaguered wife to the radical Percy. In Chapter 5, which looks at her presentation on screen, it is her visual appearance that is the dominant force in her construction, and she appears as Pandora, beautiful but deadly releaser of evils. Finally, in Chapter 6, which looks at the more unusual media in which she has appeared as a fictional character, her construction as mother to *Frankenstein*, birther of literary monsters, is foregrounded. In conclusion it becomes possible to see how the nature of her persona has been determined as much by genre, medium, and historical context as by biographical facts. It also becomes possible to see how her fictional representation is emblematic of the entanglement of factual and fictional discourses in general.

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*Dedicated to the memory of my mother,
Rina Packard,
1932-2000.*

Introduction

Over the last twenty to thirty years increasing critical attention has been paid to the entanglement of the discourses of fiction and history. This problematic relation has been central to debates surrounding postmodernism in general. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), her study of the aesthetic strategies of this period, describes ‘the problematizing of history by postmodernism’ as ‘the guiding concern of the entire book’.¹ She argues that ‘what the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past [...]. In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”.’² One of those historiographic systems is the practice of biography which gives shape and meaning to the lives of individual historical figures, and which shares in this problematic relation between factual and fictional discourses. Hutcheon points out that ‘the provisional, indeterminate nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism’.³ And the same holds true of the overlapping genres of biography and fiction: nearly a hundred years ago, Moderns like Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf were theorising about and practising biography that questioned the notional boundary separating it from fiction.

However, in recent decades, it is not only biographers who have knowingly engaged fictional narrative strategies, but fiction writers too who have used history, and particular historical figures, deliberately to draw attention to their fictive practices. This practice has been addressed by critics in a variety of formats: already mentioned is Linda Hutcheon, who coins a phrase for these new kinds of fiction, ‘historiographic metafiction’, and devotes the second half of her book to discussion of various examples of this sub-genre, some of which (often discussed in other critical studies of this area) are, E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983), and Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985).⁴

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. xii.

² Hutcheon, p. 89 (Hutcheon’s emphasis).

³ Hutcheon, p. 88.

⁴ Although a number of Ackroyd’s novels could fit the description of ‘historiographic metafiction’: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), *Chatterton* (1987), or *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993) for instance.

These kinds of texts have also had whole monographs devoted to them, for example Lucia Boldrini's *Biografie Fittizie e Personaggi Storici* (1998), and Naomi Jacobs' *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction* (1990). There have been articles written on representations of individual historical figures, such as those collected together in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama* (eds. Martin Middeke and Werner Huber, 1999), which includes essays on particular fictional representations of Mary Shelley. There have also been collections of articles on a single historical figure, such as *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde during the Last 100 Years* (eds. Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis and Julie A. Hibbard, 2002).

Until now, however, there has been no study of the historical development of the fictional persona of a singular historical figure, and it is one of the aims of this study to address this absence. A study of this kind is necessary because in tracing the development of the fictional persona of a particular historical figure it becomes possible to see, in detail, to what extent representations of this kind are affected by the genre and/or medium in which they appear, and also more importantly, how they are affected by historical context. In this way, it becomes possible to trace the popular perception of a historical figure and to see how this is affected by (and, indeed, affects) changes in critical perception. More broadly, it also becomes possible to trace how far fictional and historical discourses overlap with each other: to trace how and to what extent biographical perceptions affect fictional and conversely, to what extent the kinds of fiction a historical figure appears in is determined by the facts of their biographical narrative. In the case of Mary Shelley specifically, it becomes possible to see how far her character becomes elided, not to say confused with the nature of the work she produced, and to see the tendency towards biographical criticism in the interpretation of her work as part of this larger, fictional, tendency. It is a tendency to which almost any writer or fiction-creator who became interested in Mary Shelley and her circle contributed. In tracing the connections between biographical and fictional texts it also becomes possible to see how Mary Shelley could be seen as partly responsible for this particular way of perceiving her persona, and that it was not necessarily wholly due to a male critical establishment (or female critics accidentally playing into their hands) attempting to minimise her creative abilities.

In this way, it becomes clear why it should be the fictional persona of Mary Shelley singled out for discussion, rather than a historical figure with a better known persona - someone like Byron, for instance. He could be seen as one of the more obvious choices for a study of this kind: he practically existed as a fictional persona during his own lifetime, and that persona has, over the years, solidified into an icon. He has existed as such for nearly two hundred years, and has been fictionalised throughout that period, from Goethe's *Faust* (1808 & 1832) to Robert Nye's *The Memoirs of Lord Byron* (1989), and thus the mass of fictional material relating to him is almost overwhelming, especially including the material his persona inspired, rather than directly depicts (Goethe's being a case in point). It is this overwhelming amount of material that could preclude the study of Byron's persona in this way. However, in addition to this, is the very fact of his iconic status: he is a legendary figure, but one whose persona is so identifiably well-formed that it is also static (arguably one of the requirements of an icon is that it must have a stable set of features by which it can be defined), and therefore there is comparatively little development to be seen in a history of that persona.

Mary Shelley's fictional persona is, on the other hand, less famous, less well-defined, and therefore far more subject to the vicissitudes both of history and of her own critical reputation. This latter has seen far more flux and development than Byron's (which has remained relatively high since his life-time), and as a result of this, there has been a marked change in her persona over the course of the twentieth century. It is this development that this study traces, and in doing so, demonstrates in a broad way how the practice of fiction is also subject to those vicissitudes, but more specifically, and more interestingly, how the development of popular and critical perception of Mary Shelley reflects wider developments in the gender politics of literary criticism and of the wider world. As well as tracing the passage of a writer from the margins of critical debate and public consciousness to the centre, in tracing the passage of Mary Shelley from a shadowy presence beside her husband, the more famous Percy Bysshe, to a powerful literary figure in her own right, we can also see a journey that reflects the process of emancipation itself.

As each of the texts in which she appears as a fictional character is examined (from a group of texts which includes film, drama, poetry, and opera, as well as prose fiction), another, more detailed, pattern of development emerges. This pattern is related less to political issues and more to the more formal issues surrounding the

soluble borders between biography and fiction, and in particular how far the elision of life and work in the fictional representation of Mary Shelley can be seen to represent these broader concerns. It is arguably the case that the work of Mary Shelley has been more subject than most to the deployment of biographical criticism: critics find ways of interpreting her works, most obviously and frequently, *Frankenstein*, in terms of various facts of her life. Like many writers with whom she associated, she led a life full of incident, and which to a limited extent can be seen expressed autobiographically in her work (and as shall become clear, more explicitly in her later work than her earlier): it is unsurprising that many critics should find the lure of biography irresistible.

However, those who would rescue her from this tendency might do well to remember that it is a form of literary criticism she herself practiced. Moreover, those who would also argue that this sort of criticism is perpetrated primarily on female artists might also remember that it was a form of criticism that her husband's literary reputation suffered under. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the most heated battles over Percy Shelley's critical reputation were taking place, critical judgements about his writing were often at the mercy of slightly more subjective moral judgements about his life.⁵ This is also the period at which the subject of English Literature was beginning to be taught as a university subject, and regarded by many in the academy as the effeminate, less intellectually rigorous, cousin of philology. That biographical criticism of Percy Shelley in particular was rife at this time, is illustrated by the fact that the pejorative phrase 'chatter about Shelley' became metonymic shorthand for exactly the kind of lazy, unscientific opinionating that philologists believed their colleagues in English departments to be practising.⁶ This was also known as 'the Harriet problem',⁷ the specific episode of Percy's life 'chattered' about being the controversial separation from his first wife Harriet (née Westbrook): did he desert her, or did they part by mutual consent? And if the former,

⁵ For a more detailed examination of the role of biography in early Percy Shelley criticism, see Karsten Klejs Engelberg's *The Making of the Shelley Myth: An Annotated Bibliography of Shelley Criticism, 1822-1860* (1988), especially the chapter, 'Shelley's First Marriage', pp. 22-43.

⁶ See Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism: 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 73.

⁷ See Valerie Ross, 'Too Close to Home: Repressing Biography, Instituting Authority' in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. by William Epstein (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991), pp. 135-165 (p. 154).

does that not mean he caused her suicide? Which side of the question critics came down on would also determine their critical views of his work.

Thus it is possible to see how both the Shelleys' reputations suffered from the vivid nature of their lives overshadowing the literary value of the works they produced. As has already been suggested, it was Mary Shelley herself who was partly responsible for bringing about this state of affairs. After Percy's death she wished to bring his work to public notice, to gain the recognition he had not received during his lifetime. One way of doing this would have been to write a biography, but her father-in-law, Sir Timothy Shelley, on whom she was partly financially dependent, had placed a veto on any biography of his son appearing during his lifetime. So she set about producing a collected edition of Percy's poetry, which finally appeared in four volumes in 1839. She managed to skirt around the ban on a biography by secreting much biographical information in her notes to the poems. In this way, Emily Sunstein believes, she 'innovated a mode of literary criticism since become standard: relating the work to the circumstances in which the artist created it.'⁸ Although she may not have begun the trend for relating Percy's life and work - there were plenty of critics happy to judge his work by his perceived morals - she certainly contributed to a culture that made this form of literary criticism acceptable.

As far as Mary Shelley's own work was concerned, the impact of her Introduction to the third edition of *Frankenstein* published in 1831, must not be underestimated. It had an impact on perceptions of her life and how she created her work and arguably contributed to the idea that *Frankenstein* was an unconscious accident. There are three main ways in which it does this: through her account of her relations with Byron and Percy; through her statement of intention regarding *Frankenstein*; and through her account of the 'waking dream' that was the inspiration for her story. The Introduction tells of the summer spent in Switzerland in 1816 near the Villa Diodati, where Percy first met Byron. She tells the reader of their conversations regarding various 'philosophical doctrines' in the air at the time, conversations, she says 'to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener'.⁹ By relating how Byron instituted the ghost-story 'contest' she has already foregrounded the sensational aspects of her story, and she continues this when she declares her

⁸ Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 4.

⁹ Mary Shelley, Introduction to *Frankenstein*, in *Frankenstein*, ed. J. Paul Hunter ([1818 & 1831] New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 169-173 (p. 171). Hereafter in the main text, the 1831 Introduction.

desires for it. She wants it to be ‘one which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror - one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost-story would be unworthy of its name.’¹⁰ Here she explicitly foregrounds *Frankenstein* as a horror-story (which she continues at the end of the Introduction by naming it her ‘hideous progeny’¹¹). Thus she tells the reader of the various paths to the waking dream which was her final inspiration for the novel: ‘When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, *nor could I be said to think*. My imagination, *unbidden, possessed and guided* me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind [...] Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that *broke in upon me*. “I have *found* it!”’¹² In this account it is impossible not to notice how Mary Shelley emphasises her passivity and lack of agency in the creation of her own story. Coupled with her devout attendance at the hems of the great poets, and her insistence on *Frankenstein*’s horrific properties, to the exclusion of its political and philosophical implications, Mary Shelley creates an image of herself that is perpetuated in much early criticism of her work and many of the fictional rewritings that will be discussed over the next chapters.¹³

The fact that the 1831 Introduction was a consciously created *version* of the events at Diodati in 1816 is illustrated by pointing to two outright fictions that she attempts to carry off: she refers to Percy as her husband, and announces that ‘there were four of us’.¹⁴ Percy was not her husband at this time, and along with herself, Percy, Byron, and John Polidori, also present was her step-sister Claire Clairmont.¹⁵ Thus to see Mary Shelley as pathetic victim of crudely reductive critics is to ignore the role of her own hand in the creation of a particular image of her life and persona. The process of rendering porous the boundaries between fiction and biography was something in which Mary Shelley herself participated. Her views were inevitably

¹⁰ Shelley, p. 171.

¹¹ Shelley, p. 173.

¹² Shelley, p. 172 (my emphasis).

¹³ It was Mary Poovey, in her 1984 book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, who first noted the extent to which the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* de-radicalised and down-played the political import of the earlier edition.

¹⁴ Shelley, p. 170.

¹⁵ For a full account of her inventions and mistakes, see James Rieger, ‘Dr. Polidori and the Genesis of *Frankenstein*’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 3 (1963), 461-472. Although in this article Rieger is so hostile to Mary Shelley, and so trusting of Polidori’s account, that he ends virtually arguing that Polidori wrote *Frankenstein*, it is nonetheless useful for highlighting how Mary Shelley’s account of the creation of the novel was a fictionalised one.

perpetuated by the steady stream of biographies (sympathetic and hostile), of both Percy and herself that have appeared since her death. It is these, as well as Mary Shelley's own assessments of her life, that form the historical basis for the fictions in which her character appears. Thus, Chapter 1 constitutes a survey of the biographical history of Mary (and Percy) Shelley and forms the basis of this study.

Critics have continually interpreted Mary Shelley's work in the terms of her life: for instance Christopher Small's contention that Victor Frankenstein is Percy Shelley in his 1972 study, *Ariel Like a Harpy*, or Ellen Moers' argument in 1976 that the novel was written in response to Mary Shelley's tragic experience of motherhood. If critics find the pull of biography irresistible then it has exerted an even greater pull on the creators of fiction. However, instead of reading her work in terms of her life, they create narratives of her life that are envisaged in fictional terms: at first in broadly generic terms, but later in the terms of Mary Shelley's own fiction, in the terms of *Frankenstein* itself. In Chapter 2, for instance, which examines the prose fictions of the 1930s in which Mary Shelley first appeared as a fictional character, it is unsurprising to find that a life even Mary Shelley herself described as 'romantic beyond romance'¹⁶ was defined by that genre - romance. These romances, whose central character was Percy rather than Mary Shelley, carried on appearing intermittently until the early 1960s. They are the fictions in which Mary is defined primarily by her relationship to her husband, and her own literary activities tended to be sidelined. It was in the latter years of the 1960s that a marked change came about in representations of her life, and Chapter 3 traces how her growing literary profile led to her life being represented in the terms of her most famous fiction. This took place at the level of correspondences between real-life figures and the fictional characters of *Frankenstein*, so that for instance either Byron or Percy would become the inspiration for the character of Victor Frankenstein, or Mary or Byron would be the monster, or Mary would be Elizabeth. It also took place, however, at a deeper, structural level of the narrative, so that her life was read in Gothic terms. Diodati becomes reimagined as a traditional Gothic setting, while the fact that Mary Shelley's actual journal that covers the period of the conception of *Frankenstein* is missing, becomes reimagined in terms of Gothically incomplete or missing manuscripts.

¹⁶ Mary Shelley's Journal, 19 December 1822, quoted in Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) p. 81.

Incomplete or lost manuscripts are, of course, as much a feature of postmodern texts as they are of Gothic ones, and the device of the 'found' documents, newly edited by a kindly literary soul, is deployed in two later texts which appeared in the early 1990s: Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters* (1991) and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992). In the former the missing journal is reconfigured as Mary Shelley's lost voice, recovered from the suppressing forces of male historiography. In Gray's text, on the other hand, it is her position as a writer who is the daughter of writers that is used to foreground the patchworked textuality of life-stories themselves, a theme which is also addressed in Shelley Jackson's 'hypertext', *Patchwork Girl* (1995). This appears in Chapter 6 as one of a number of different, more unusual, media in which Mary Shelley has been represented.

Following the discussion of prose fictions in Chapters 2 and 3, Chapters 4 and 5 go on to examine her representation in the visual media of theatre and film. It is in these that we begin to see how it is not only genre, but medium too which affects the representation of fictional character: in the context of the radical history of late twentieth-century British theatre, Mary Shelley is reimagined as a character similar to that of Alison, Jimmy Porter's long-suffering partner in *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the play that is largely seen as having revitalised the political tradition in British theatre. In plays like Ann Jellicoe's *Shelley: The Idealist* (1966) and Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* (1984) she is partly constructed as a victim of Percy's raging idealism. In Chapter 5 it is the visual aspects of cinema that are found to determine Mary Shelley's representation: it is, after all, the medium that produced the iconic visual representation of the novel in Boris Karloff's flat-headed, bolt-necked incarnation of the monster in James Whale's 1931 film. Hence, this version of the story, rather than the 1818 or 1831 text, becomes the basis for the reimagining of Mary Shelley. Film is the medium in which Mary Shelley was never wife to Percy, but always creator of *Frankenstein*, and this has combined with its visual nature to produce a character defined by her appearance: she becomes Pandora, the beautiful yet deadly box-opener, releaser of evil into the world.

Finally, Chapter 6 gathers together some of the more unexpected genres and media which have been inspired by Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*. Already mentioned are opera and hypertext, but also included are poetry, radio comedy, and a text which is the account of someone who claims to have been Mary Shelley in a previous life, and can therefore only be termed 'non-fiction'. Nearly all of these

feature a way of perceiving Mary Shelley's creation of *Frankenstein* that has appeared intermittently in other texts: in terms of childbirth or parturition as a metaphor for artistic creativity. This is a metaphor that has existed as a way of expressing the artistic impulse since Plato, and has been used in a variety of contexts, by both men and women. It finds a particularly comfortable home in the construction of the persona of Mary Shelley for the obvious reason that *Frankenstein* can so easily be read as an expression of that metaphor. The fact that she refers to the novel as her 'hideous progeny' and 'offspring' in the 1831 Introduction could be seen to have authorised these later readings of her life and work. In Anne Edwards' *Haunted Summer* (1972) Mary Shelley is envisioned as being 'pregnant' with the life of the story, having been 'impregnated' by Byron; similarly in Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters* (mentioned above) it is Percy who helps Mary 'conceive', and the dates of the composition of *Frankenstein* are altered slightly by Chernaik in order to conform to the required nine-month gestation period. In all but one of the texts discussed in Chapter 6, this metaphor is deployed to various ends, and with various results: in Erica Jong's poetry it takes on a negative cast, as childbirth represents the subjection of women to their bodies, and the preclusion of artistic activity, whereas in the radio comedy *Dead Man Talking*, in which she is interviewed jointly with Robert Oppenheimer, the 'father' of the atom bomb, she becomes mother to her monster, as well as to the scientific destruction wreaked by Oppenheimer's creative activities.

If Mary Shelley is seen as mother to her text, with the father configured as either or both of the great poets with whom she associated, then Diodati in 1816 is the primal scene. This primal scene of creation could prove a source of attraction in almost any artist's biography, and especially any woman artist's biography, but in Mary Shelley's case the pull is stronger because the components of the scene lend themselves so easily to a sexual metaphor: Mary Shelley's presence among her artistic and social peers, who are men, and with one of whom she has a sexual relationship (the other being a possibility too). All of these elements combine to create a scene that presents the creation of an intellectual work in sexual, physical terms. Like any primal scene it exerts a fascination that is the fascination with origins, and draws in novelists, playwrights, film-makers, and poets time and again: of the thirty-four texts discussed in the following chapters, twenty are set either wholly or partly at Diodati.

In recent years critics have lamented the fact that Mary Shelley and her works other than *Frankenstein* have remained somewhat neglected, even though

Frankenstein itself has been canonized: 'Ironically, the canonization of *Frankenstein* has institutionalized the marginality of Mary Shelley, throwing her salient and central voice to the edges of Romantic discourse'.¹⁷ This was written in the introduction to *The Other Mary Shelley* (1993), a collection of essays on Mary Shelley's works other than *Frankenstein*, and as a result of this new attention her other works began to emerge from obscurity, published in new editions, and discussed in criticism. By 2000, when Nora Crook was writing her introduction to Michael Eberle-Sinatra's collection of essays, *Mary Shelley's Fictions*, it was even possible to see a further development, from the presence in criticism of two Mary Shelleys: 'beyond a simple *Frankenstein*/ Not *Frankenstein* binary opposition and towards a synthesis, where her oeuvre might be restored to its wholeness.'¹⁸ However, this development was only taking place at the cutting edge of research; as far as 'the public at large and [...] most university students' are concerned, the phase of criticism that began Mary Shelley's career in the academy - the phase that presents her as 'Author of *Frankenstein*' - 'has, of course, never passed away; Shelley remains the originating cause of a series of *Frankenstein* films and author of the most widely studied novel in the universities of the USA - and that is that.'¹⁹ It is this perception too that we find most often expressed in the fictions that follow. In examining some of the fictional myths (if that is not a tautology) that have grown up around certain portions of Mary Shelley's biographical narrative, I hope also to explore how they have become entangled with both critical and biographical myths too. As Crook points out, 'Few writers have been more subject to having their work interpreted as disguised biography than Shelley, and this has provoked, in turn, an extensive literature of protest against such reductionism.'²⁰ This protest has itself generated a certain aura of taboo around the issue of what Crook terms 'biographism' in relation to Mary Shelley. This is illustrated when Crook says that we must 'confront' it, and praises one critic who engages in a new biographical reading of *Frankenstein* for having 'grasp[ed] the nettle'.²¹

¹⁷ Audrey A. Fisch, and others, eds, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 4.

¹⁸ Nora Crook, Introduction to *Mary Shelley's Fictions: From Frankenstein to Falkner*, ed. by Michael Eberle-Sinatra (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. xix-xxvi (p. xx).

¹⁹ Crook, p. xix.

²⁰ Crook, p. xxiii

²¹ Crook, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

In examining the representation of Mary Shelley in fiction it is no less necessary to confront this issue of 'biographism', and especially the relationship between Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein* as it is presented to and perceived by 'the public at large'. In confronting this relationship and its repeated depiction in fictional texts, neither embracing nor disdaining it, and combining this with an engagement with broader debates about the relationship between 'fiction' and 'reality', I hope to help cut to the heart of the knot into which criticism, biography and fiction have become so entangled in the case of Mary Shelley. Crook speaks optimistically of 'the emergence of lifewriting studies' helping 'to dissolve the old distinctions between "reality" and "art", making possible new negotiations and nuancing of an old problem.'²² The following discussion of the fictional biography of Mary Shelley is an attempt to engage in one of those new negotiations.

²² Crook, p. xxiv.

1. A Short History of Mary Shelley Biography¹

Mary Shelley, unlike many of her early companions, survived into the Victorian age, and when she died many of the characteristics commonly ascribed to that age were in place, and were also often ascribed to her. There have been critics who regard Mary Shelley's attitudes and behaviour in later life to be quintessentially Victorian: her remorse-driven idealisation of Percy is seen as having led to his more widespread angelification by critics; her apparent prudish hypocrisy led her to misrepresent the dates of both her own and her parents' marriages. These revisionary practices were common in biography at that time, the writing of which was, as Ian Hamilton rather vividly observes, often accompanied by 'the sound of snipping scissors and paper crackling in the grate.'² What was started by Mary Shelley was continued with a will by her descendants, and it is with them that the history of Mary Shelley biography begins. Although Mary Shelley's perceptions of herself have inevitably shaped her later image, these are autobiography rather than biography, and would need a book on their own to be discussed adequately. It is with others' perceptions of Mary Shelley that this discussion is most concerned, and so an account of the biographical background to which most of the fictions discussed in the following chapters owe their existence, begins at Mary Shelley's death in 1851.

After her death the vast collection of Shelley papers, including manuscripts, letters and journals that had belonged to both Percy Bysshe and Mary, and which were crucial documents in the piecing together of their life-stories, passed into the hands of Lady Jane Shelley and her husband (Mary Shelley's son) Sir Percy Florence.³ Any history of the early biographical background of the Shelleys usually starts with and centres upon the figure of Lady Jane. Although it was both she and

¹ Although I acknowledge sources individually where appropriate, I may not have been able to do so as scrupulously as necessary because the sourcing is so tangled, so I would like to make it clear that much of the material in this chapter on the biographical background of the Shelleys is indebted to the following sources (in alphabetical order): Betty T. Bennett's volume on Mary Shelley in the series *Lives of the Great Romantics* (1999); Chapters 1 & 2 of Karstein Klejs Engelberg's *The Making of the Shelley Myth: An Annotated Bibliography of Shelley Criticism, 1822-1860* (1988); Ian Hamilton's chapter 'At the Shelley Shrine' in his *Keepers of the Flame* (1992); Sylva Norman's *Flight of the Skylark* (1954); Miranda Seymour's chapter on the 'Afterlife' in her biography *Mary Shelley* (2000); and Emily Sunstein's similar chapter, 'Romance and Reality' in her biography *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (1989).

² Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p. 139.

³ Because of the crowd of different Shelleys who appear in this chapter, I have found it easiest to identify each of them by their first name.

Percy Florence who held control of the papers, it was Lady Jane's energy which was the driving force behind the Shelley industry that burgeoned in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. And although it was Percy Bysshe's literary reputation that was at stake during this period, and it was this that Lady Jane was seeking to bolster and preserve, it was Mary Shelley who was her guardian angel and inspiration, because it was the latter whom she had actually met. It is a meeting described vividly by Lady Jane herself:

As I opened the door I started back in surprise, for some one was sitting on the sofa, and I said to myself, 'Who are you – you lovely being?' She must have seen my start of surprise, for, rising gently from the sofa, she came towards me and said very softly, 'I am Mary Shelley.' [...] She was tall and slim, and had the most beautiful deep-set eyes I have ever seen.⁴

This is the moment at which Lady Jane had, in the words of a later critic, 'fallen in love' with Mary Shelley.⁵ This may be an exaggeration but it accurately identifies the importance held by Mary Shelley for Lady Jane, to the extent that, according to Ian Hamilton, 'it was her belief that, without Mary, Shelley might not have added up to much.'⁶ This led to the idealisation, not to say romanticisation, of Mary and Percy's relationship, and Lady Jane's corresponding unwillingness to admit anything into her interpretation of events that might cast a shadow over their behaviour. The permanent alterations Lady Jane and Sir Percy Shelley made to the papers; the biographies produced under their aegis; and the rows that resulted, affected decades of subsequent research and debate. More importantly (in the context of this thesis), in the effect this history had on Percy Shelley scholarship, it had a corresponding effect on the scholarship and perception of Mary Shelley.

The Shelleys' critical and biographical reputations are symbiotically linked, most obviously and least remarkably because they were husband and wife who had a passionate and sometimes fraught intellectual and emotional relationship. After his death, Mary sought to idealise Percy and boost his critical standing, thus

⁴ Maud Rolleston, *Talks with Lady Shelley* (London: George G. Harrap, 1925), pp. 27-8.

⁵ Sylva Norman, *Flight of the Skylark: The development of Shelley's reputation* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1954), p. 179.

⁶ Hamilton, p. 133.

automatically rendering her own literary reputation secondary. If he was idealised by the Victorians, then so was she; if he was ridiculed by the anti-Victorians of the early twentieth century, then so was she. But the wranglings that occurred in the years following Mary's death were amongst those who had known them, and so the disputes were both bitter and complex. For example, the existence of Harriet Shelley, Percy Bysshe's first wife, and the problems thrown up by the last stages of Percy's relationship with her, posed something of a threat to Lady Shelley's perception of her parents-in-law. She wished to propagate the tidy vision of Percy and Harriet separating by mutual consent before his meeting with Mary, leaving him free to pursue a relationship with the (in Lady Shelley's eyes) much worthier woman. It was known by many who had known the Shelleys that this was a deeply distorted reading of events, and it was the treatment of this knot in the tangle of biographical facts, that precipitated the anger of some of Percy's surviving friends, who had known Harriet as well as Mary. What follows is as brief as possible a summary of the biographies of the Shelleys that were produced over this period, and the attendant problems they raised.

In her search for a biographer who would take on the task of the life of Percy Bysshe, Lady Shelley first alighted on his friend from his earliest days, Thomas Jefferson Hogg. Unfortunately he proved to be insufficiently reverent for her taste and after the appearance of the first two volumes of his life in 1858 (there were to have been four), Lady Shelley revoked Hogg's access to the papers, and began to cast about for someone more appropriate (and more submissive). Stung by her experience, she decided to write an interim biography that might counteract some of the harmful effects (as she perceived them) of Hogg's first volumes. These were the *Shelley Memorials* of 1859. Those who had actually known the Shelleys, were unhappy with what they saw as Lady Shelley's whitewash in this publication. Thomas Love Peacock in his review of the work, pointed to Lady Shelley's attempt to introduce by stealth the idea that Percy and Mary did not meet until after Harriet Shelley's death. He also counteracts Lady Shelley's denigration of Harriet, with his own fulsome praise of her many virtues: 'Her spirits were always cheerful; her laugh spontaneous, hearty, and joyous. She was well-educated. She read agreeably and intelligently. She wrote only letters, but she wrote them well. Her manners were good; and her

whole aspect and demeanour such manifest emanations of pure and truthful nature, that to be once in her company was to know her thoroughly.’⁷ He is, on the other hand, more reserved about Mary Shelley, but notes politely, ‘That Shelley’s second wife was intellectually better suited to him than his first, no one who knew them both will deny.’⁸ Lady Shelley was duly chastened, and it was not until after the deaths of inconvenient witnesses like Hogg and Peacock that she was to look for and find a more appropriate biographer.

This was Edward Dowden, professor of English at Trinity College, Dublin, and so reverent that he is reported to have felt as if he had been offered a Bishopric.⁹ His *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (in two volumes) (1886) became thereafter (and despite its perceived failings) the standard biographical source for many decades. The perceived failings again centred upon the treatment of Harriet, which came in for some heavy criticism, most memorably from Mark Twain. In his review of Dowden’s work, ‘In Defense of Harriet Shelley’, Twain positively frothed with anger: ‘What excuse was there for raking up a parcel of foul rumours from malicious and discredited sources and flinging them at this dead girl’s head?’, he demanded.¹⁰ This impassioned defence led Twain to a correspondingly powerful animus against the rest of the Shelley clan, whom he describes as ‘a group of people whose very names make a person shudder: Mary Godwin, mistress of Shelley; her part-sister, discarded mistress of Lord Byron; Godwin, the philosophical tramp.’¹¹ This is a model case of how defence of Harriet tended to lead to a corresponding demonisation of Mary.

Perhaps the most famous assessment of Dowden, and arguably the most influential in its creation of a particular view of the poet, came from Matthew Arnold, in which he made his fatal pronouncement that Percy Bysshe ‘is “a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.”’¹² Fatal, because Arnold, in his review of and his reaction against Dowden’s biography effectively invents his own, preferred version of the poet, one that kills off the political radical and atheist who left his first wife to live in sin with another woman (herself the

⁷ H.F.B. Brett-Smith, ed., *Peacock’s Memoirs of Shelley with Shelley’s Letter to Peacock*, (London: Henry Frowde, 1909) (First published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, 1858, 1860, & 1862) p. 51.

⁸ *Peacock’s Memoirs*, p. 51.

⁹ Hamilton, p. 137.

¹⁰ Mark Twain, *In Defense of Harriet Shelley and other essays* (New York: Harper, 1918), p. 57.

¹¹ Twain, p. 55.

¹² Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism. Second Series* ([1888] London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 252 (Arnold’s emphasis).

daughter of political radicals) and with whom Arnold simply could not cope, to instate an ineffectual angel in his place. Arnold shares Twain's and Peacock's reservations about Dowden's treatment of Harriet, which 'is not worthy. [...] His championship of Shelley makes him very unjust to a cruelly used and unhappy girl',¹³ but Arnold's main complaint about the biography is that we simply find out too much about the sordid details of Percy's life. He instead praises the brief portrait we find of him in Mary Shelley's notes to her edition of the poems, which he admits are 'somewhat idealised by tender regret and exalted memory'.¹⁴ He nevertheless decides that 'our ideal Shelley was the true Shelley after all; what has been gained by making us at moments doubt it? What has been gained by forcing upon us much in him which is ridiculous and odious.'¹⁵ In the same vein he also chooses to reject Percy Bysshe's 'nonsense about tyrants and priests'.¹⁶

Although Arnold's idealisation of Percy Bysshe was couched in criticism of Dowden, and therefore apparently antithetical to it, both critics' views were in fact symptomatic of a wider attitude to life-writing current at the time, and of which Lady Jane Shelley was also a part. As I mentioned earlier, Ian Hamilton observed that Victorian biography was often underlaid by the sounds of snipping scissors and burning paper, and the reader can, if she listens closely, hear those sounds in both Dowden's and Arnold's views on the poet. In Dowden's case, however, those sounds can be heard on a less metaphorical level because Lady Shelley, under advice from Richard Garnett, her 'literary henchman',¹⁷ did in fact destroy a number of Shelley papers. Although Dowden's biography was characterised as deeply skewed, and its author in the pay of a family with vested interests and who could thus never be wholly trusted, his idealisation is watery compared to Arnold's full-blooded fiction. Nevertheless it met with Lady Shelley's approval, in a way that Hogg's did not, nor indeed that given by another of Percy's associates, Edward John Trelawny.

Although he only knew Percy for the last six months of his life, Trelawny has become a much debated figure in the history of Shelley biography, for a number of reasons. First, because he was arguably as instrumental as Arnold in establishing the mythology surrounding Percy; secondly, because of his corresponding denigration of

¹³ Arnold, p. 239.

¹⁴ Arnold, p. 207.

¹⁵ Arnold, p. 218.

¹⁶ Arnold, p. 246.

¹⁷ David Crane, *Lord Byron's Jackal: A Life of Edward John Trelawny* ([1998] London: Flamingo, 1999), p. 341.

Mary, which had an equal (if opposite) effect on her reputation; and lastly because he was such an intriguing character himself. Part of the fascination of Trelawny (and which certainly has a bearing on his role as a biographer) is his role as fabulist and self-inventor. Noted by William St. Clair in his 1977 book *Trelawny: The Incurable Romancer*, who claimed that Trelawny began his invention of himself around the time he met Byron and Shelley in Italy in 1821. In the face of their superior wealth, talent and learning, he felt inadequate and had to talk himself up. And after Shelley's death he 'converted himself into a keeper of the shrine, an earnest defender of the man he had known for less than six months but towards whom he now felt a veneration which would in time rival and threaten Mary's own dedicated love.'¹⁸ His fabrication also formed the basis of the most recent biography, David Crane's *Lord Byron's Jackal* (1999) in which he points out that Trelawny is 'to modern scholarship [...]one of the great obstacles to historical truth, a compulsive braggart and a liar.'¹⁹ Crane's more detailed work also shows the gradual development of the relationship between Trelawny and Mary Shelley: he came to know the Shelleys well in 1822, the last year of Percy's life, and eventually shared a close, even at times flirtatious relationship with Mary, but in their disagreements over the memory of Percy and how it should best be preserved, relations deteriorated, and after her death he turned on her.²⁰

Trelawny's initial account of his relationship with the poets was the *Recollections of Shelley and Byron* of 1858. As Anne Barton notes in her introduction to the later version, *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, 'by 1878, "Recollections" had hardened into "Records" and Trelawny (now almost ninety) was claiming equal billing with the two famous poets.'²¹ Vividly written from the point-of-view of one who had known Percy (if only briefly), the *Records* were regarded at the time and for a long while afterwards (and despite Lady Shelley's disapproval) as a valuable biographical source. It was in an appendix to the *Records* that Trelawny launched the attack on Mary Shelley that was to have such an influence on later perceptions of her. In it, Trelawny describes Mary in these terms: 'Mrs. Shelley was of a soft, lymphatic temperament, the exact opposite to Shelley in everything; she was

¹⁸ Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (London: John Murray, 2000), pp. 304-5.

¹⁹ Crane, p. 8.

²⁰ Mary Shelley was not the only victim of Trelawny's volatile tendency to extremes of love and hate. After Byron's death he scorned the man he had once hero-worshipped. See Crane, p. 129.

²¹ Anne Barton, Introduction to *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* by Edward John Trelawny (New York: New York Review Books, 2000), p. xxi.

moping and miserable when alone, and yearning for society. Her capacity can be judged by the novels she wrote after Shelley's death, more than ordinarily commonplace and conventional.'²²

These qualities – 'miserable' 'yearning for society' 'conventional' – were turned by her sympathetic biographers into admirable qualities. For the late-nineteenth-century, the image of Mary Shelley as the lesser satellite fitted in nicely with a very Victorian conception of womanhood, and her persona became that of suitable helpmeet for a man of genius. It is a conception which seems to be held firmly by Arnold when he finds Mary Shelley in Dowden's biography to be 'attractive' only after her marriage to Percy, 'Up to her marriage her letters and journal do not please. Her ability is manifest, but she is not attractive. In the world discovered to us by Professor Dowden as surrounding Shelley up to 1817, the most pleasing figure is poor Fanny Godwin; after Fanny Godwin, the most pleasing figure is Harriet Shelley herself.'²³ Arnold clearly takes against Mary's 'ability'. It is also intriguing that the women who most please Arnold are the wilting Cinderellas of the circle, Fanny and Harriet, who, moreover, both committed suicide. If one of the cardinal virtues of the angel of the house is self-effacement, what greater act of self-effacement is there than suicide? It is this Victorian conception of womanhood that shaped the earliest portraits of Mary Shelley.

It can be seen in the very first biography of her to be published, Helen Moore's *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1886). Moore begins by wondering at the lack of a separate biography of the woman who contributed so much to one of the richest periods of literature, but then finds her explanation 'in the fact that she was Mrs Shelley; for the true reason why we find no life of her separate from Shelley, is because in a sense she had no separate life. Before he came her life was empty; after his death it was the tomb from which her lord had risen.'²⁴ As far as Moore is concerned, Mary was put on this earth to be the wife of Percy Shelley, and what's more she executed this task to the glory of her sex:

In that union she realized her true life; into it her separate being merged. The life of Mrs. Shelley thus presents the truly womanly life, - that complementary

²² Edward John Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* ([1878] New York: New York Review Books, 2000) p. 297.

²³ Arnold, p. 239.

²⁴ Helen Moore, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1886), p. 10.

one, to which a perfect union (what so rare!) gives a vigor, an individuality, a beauty, denied to those lives which spend themselves in unmated unions or in single-hand combats with the world.²⁵

The belief that Mary Shelley's life was empty in the biographical bookends before and after Percy's presence is reflected in the structure of Moore's biography. Her life with him takes up most of the 300-odd pages, and the final chapter which covers the period from Percy's death to Mary's is entitled 'Return to England – Death', which seems to imply that Mary spent the remaining twenty-nine years of her life waiting to die.

Although not nearly as romanticised as Moore's life, Florence A. Marshall's *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1889) was still in the Victorian mode: Mary Shelley was the devoted wife and mother, and her religious nature was emphasized. Marshall was the authorised biographer, and Miranda Seymour, in her recent biography of Mary Shelley, characterises Lady Shelley's and Marshall's relationship in these terms: 'Lady Shelley had been a little cowed by Dowden's academic qualifications; she felt confident of controlling a timid lady biographer [...] Florence Marshall was content to be led.'²⁶ Seymour observes that the only criticism Marshall made was of her writings, and to Lady Shelley this did not matter because 'moral reputation was of more importance than literary status, after all. Just as in Shelley's case, she was happy to see the fiery, more dangerous side of his nature overshadowed by examples of his gentleness and by emphasis on his least radical works.'²⁷ Indeed Hamilton's claim that Lady Shelley believed Mary Shelley to be superior to her husband in many ways is supported by Marshall's professed view of Mary: unlike Moore, who believed that 'the fire of her genius had been quenched by the same waters that swept Shelley from her arms',²⁸ Marshall rather thought that it was Percy's existence that stunted Mary's powers. She says:

That he became what he did is in great measure due to her. [...] But, besides this, she would have been eminent among her sex at any time, in any circumstances, and would, it cannot be doubted, have achieved greater personal fame than she actually did but

²⁵ Moore, p. 11.

²⁶ Seymour, pp. 553-4.

²⁷ Seymour, p. 554.

²⁸ Moore, p. 290.

for the fact that she became, at a very early age, the wife of Shelley. Not only has his name overshadowed her, but the circumstance of her association with him were such as to check to a considerable extent her own sources of invention and activity.²⁹

Although Hamilton scoffs at Lady Shelley for elevating Mary above Percy it must be remembered that he is also generally hostile to Mary Shelley. A more recent (and more sympathetic) biographer of Mary Shelley has quoted Marshall more approvingly as identifying the key element that shaped the early reputation of Mary Shelley.³⁰

So, although the Victorian tussles over the Shelleys' reputations produced subterfuge and romanticisation, Lady Shelley's infatuation with Mary meant that her importance in literary history was noted early. However, it was in her role as amanuensis and companion that she was glorified, rather than for any artistic talent or merit in her own right. Although it is safe to say that *Frankenstein* had by that time already entered the public consciousness as a powerful myth, the fact that Mary Shelley was behind this was dismissed. In the quotation above, Marshall, in attempting to make a place for her in literary history, in fact succeeds in burying the notion that Mary Shelley produced anything of literary merit. And although Helen Moore praises the 'allegorical' nature of *Frankenstein*, she goes on with the proviso that 'nothing is more improbable than that it was written with such design, or that the youthful author was fully aware or even conscious of the extent to which the allegorical overlies largely the narrative in her work.'³¹ The view that Mary Shelley didn't mean it was to remain current, in various forms, until very recently.

Marshall also framed her biography of Mary Shelley as a response to 'her husband's biographers' who 'have been busy with her name'.³² She does not specify who these are, but we can guess that she shares Lady Shelley's disapproval of both Hogg and Trelawny. However, Marshall claims that as well as being vilified, Mary Shelley has been equally falsely over-praised, and concludes that she must steer a true course through these various misconceptions. Thus, she sees her biography as a corrective to perceptions of Mary Shelley that are already becoming dangerously entrenched: 'She has been variously misunderstood. It has been her lot to be idealised

²⁹ Florence A. Marshall, *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 2 VOLS (London: Richard Bentley, 1889), I, p. 2.

³⁰ John Williams, *Mary Shelley: A Literary Life* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p. 1.

³¹ Moore, p. 250.

³² Marshall, p. 3.

as one who gave up all for love, and to be condemned and anathematised for the very same reason. She has been extolled for perfections she did not possess, and decried for the absence of those she possessed in the highest degree. She has been lauded as a genius, and depreciated as one overrated.³³ It is possible that Helen Moore's more hyperbolic passages represent an example of this kind of exaggeration. In her description of the Shelleys' relationship Moore muses:

Is there not some prenatal influence which shapes two souls the one for the other? Do they not wander stumblingly through life till they meet?[...] Were not the years preparing Heloise and Abelard for one another?[...] Was there none save the gentle Colonna to inspire and subdue Michael Angelo? Why did Antony traverse so many miles of sea to find his fate in Egypt's queen?³⁴

Through the mythologisations that arose around her husband, Mary Shelley became equally mythologized. Moreover, not only did the fictionalisation of her life paradoxically begin with biography but she also had a hand in this process. Helen Moore can hardly be blamed or mocked for her somewhat overblown account, when it is Mary Shelley herself who describes the different phases in her life with Percy as 'the heads of chapters – each containing a tale, romantic beyond romance.'³⁵

The tendency to decorate biography with fictive flourishes was not to change over the next few decades, if anything it was to become more pronounced. With the rise of what was then dubbed the 'New Biography' by Virginia Woolf in her essay of the same name (1927), came the belief that there might perhaps be more truth in the imaginative rendering of a life than in the dogged pursuit of the facts of the matter. This may seem suspiciously akin to Matthew Arnold's preference for the ideal Shelley over the real one, but the New Biographers were also in reaction against the kind of idealisation of public figures that Arnold's essay on Shelley exemplified. In Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), seen by many as having begun this revolution, all the features that characterised the new practice were evident, and encompassed both the form and the content of the work: the traditional belief that a

³³ Marshall, p. 3.

³⁴ Moore, pp. 62-3.

³⁵ Mary Shelley's Journal, 19 December 1822, quoted in Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) p. 81.

life (even one as short as Percy Shelley's) could not be fully documented in less than two volumes was overturned by Strachey's four lives in less than three hundred pages; the guiding attitude to his subjects was not reverence, but what he claimed to be the truth; the truth was seen to reside not in the facts, but in the presentation of the facts. In fact it could be said that as far as style and methodology were concerned, the 'New Biography' was not that new: the same fictive techniques to be found in biographies such as Helen Moore's, were also deployed by Strachey and his colleagues, the difference being they were used to undermine and satirise rather than to idealise and glorify. The 'editing' techniques and omission of evidence we might deplore in Lady Jane Shelley, were also present in Strachey's succinct yet brutal portraits of his Victorian subjects, but the aim was blackwash rather than whitewash. These two main aspects of biography – the editing or selection of material, and the fictivity of its presentation – were suddenly the focus of criticism, not because Strachey and others were the first to use them, but because they were the first to foreground them deliberately.

In Strachey's introduction to *Eminent Victorians*, as well as declaring his aim 'to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions' he simultaneously deplores previous biographers' 'lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design.'³⁶ As the existence of a design presupposes the existence also of ulterior intentions, Strachey was being disingenuous, but his main complaints about his predecessors were shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by many of his colleagues. Virginia Woolf expressed their disenchantment best in her description of Victorian biography:

The widow and the friends were hard taskmasters. Suppose, for example, that the man of genius was immoral, ill-tempered, and threw the boots at the maid's head. The widow would say, 'Still I loved him – he was the father of my children; and the public, who love his books, must on no account be disillusioned. Cover up; omit.' The biographer obeyed. And thus the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street – effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to

³⁶ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* ([1918] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 10.

the body in the coffin.³⁷

As far as Woolf was concerned it was Lytton Strachey, amongst others, who helped to change all this.

He did this first by being in possession of the detachment lacked by the widows and friends, and also by succeeding in conveying the personality of his subjects, that 'something of rainbow-like intangibility' described by Woolf.³⁸ One way in which Strachey was able to transmit the ineffable rainbow of personality in *Eminent Victorians* is not only in his adept selection of the facts, but also in his use of free indirect discourse. He does not go so far as to invent dialogue, but he does presume to speak with the voice of his subjects, as evinced in his catty depiction of Florence Nightingale's narrow-minded parents:

Mrs Nightingale, too, began to notice that there was something wrong. It was very odd; what could be the matter with dear Flo? Mr Nightingale suggested that a husband might be advisable; but the curious thing was that she seemed to take no interest in husbands. And with her attractions, and her accomplishments too! There was nothing in the world to prevent her making a really brilliant match. But no! She would think of nothing but how to satisfy that singular craving of hers to be *doing* something. As if there not plenty to do in any case, in the ordinary way, at home. There was the china to look after, and there was her father to be read to after dinner.³⁹

As well as apparently placing words in the mouths of Nightingale's parents who, being dead, have no right of reply, Strachey is simply terribly rude about them. As I mentioned above, it was this irreverence that was the key feature that marked the 'New Biography' out as new, rather than any real changes in methodology or style. When Strachey seeks to correct the conventional view of Florence Nightingale as ministering angel by pointing out that, on the contrary 'A Demon possessed her', he is simply exchanging one myth for another.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography' in *The Death of the Moth*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1942), pp. 119-126 (pp. 120-21).

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography' in *Granite and Rainbow*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1958), pp. 149-155 (p. 149) (First publ. in *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 October 1927).

³⁹ Strachey, p. 112.

One of the most famous offspring of the new biographical trend (and one which perhaps justifies the description of *Eminent Victorians* as ‘one of the most pernicious influences in modern biography’), was André Maurois’ *Ariel: A Shelley Romance* (1924).⁴⁰ In the same way that Strachey simply changed the light in which his subjects were viewed rather than uncovering anything new about them, Maurois took the Victorian myth of the etherealised, almost non-human Percy Shelley, and instead of idolising him, ridiculed him. In it he becomes the ‘aërial’ poet of cliché, (an adjective Maurois takes every opportunity to use) with his feet barely on the ground. He is also entirely feminised: described as ‘awkward as a woman in all things appertaining to boats, but full of good intentions,’ and ‘exceptionally beautiful, with brilliant blue eyes, dark curling hair, and delicate complexion’.⁴¹ If Percy became a poetic angel, unconnected to earthly matters, then Mary Shelley became his opposite: a petit-bourgeois woman who ultimately cared only for respectability and the material world of saucepans and bonnets. Of the Shelleys’ cohabitation with Edward and Jane Williams in 1822, Maurois observes ‘Housekeeping in common is for women the acid test. There were stupid quarrels over servants and frying-pans’.⁴²

The other major influence that can be felt in Maurois’ text is Trelawny’s *Records*, mentioned above. Trelawny was revered by later generations who harked back to an earlier, Romantic age, because he remained a die-hard romantic until his death, never abandoning his radicalism and eccentricity: he was an anti-Victorian living in the lion’s den. David Crane describes Trelawny’s move in the 1860s to Pelham Crescent in London: ‘Built in the 1830s by the architect of Belgrave Square, [it] provided the perfect backdrop for his final performance[...], an elegant world of middle class and professional prosperity and comfort that set off its nineteenth century Diogenes in stark and admonitory relief, his manners, tone, beliefs and very physical presence a challenge to mid-Victorian conventions.’⁴³ For the anti-Victorians of later decades, Trelawny was simply a man ahead of his time, and they embraced his visions of the poets, and simultaneously that of his Mary Shelley – the less able, altogether less remarkable wife of an extra-terrestrial poet. Maurois later regretted *Ariel* as the

⁴⁰ It was described as this by Douglas Southall Freeman, quoted in Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, rev. ed. (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 424.

⁴¹ André Maurois, *Ariel: A Shelley Romance*, trans. by Ella D’Arcy ([1923] London: Bodley Head, 1924), p. 288 & p. 6.

⁴² Maurois, p. 284.

⁴³ Crane, p. 332.

work of a younger man who was trying to lay the ghosts of his own romanticism,⁴⁴ but this could not affect the fact that *Ariel* had consolidated the perception of Percy Bysshe as ineffectual angel handcuffed to a Victorian prude of a wife.

In the opposite camp, to those more sympathetic to Mary, it was Marshall's and Lady Shelley's image of the *mater dolorosa* that became entrenched. Lady Jane tells the story of meeting an old sailor in Lerici, where Percy Bysshe died, who 'rushed to him [Percy Florence], threw himself down and kissed my husband's feet. "Oh, how I loved him!" he said. "He was fair, he was beautiful, he was like Jesus Christ. I carried him in my arms through the water - yes, he was like Jesus Christ"⁴⁵ Lady Jane reveals that the sailor also has a picture of Mary: "'The ladies left it behind them in the house when they went so quickly after the death, and I found it and have kept it and loved it. [...] I have said my prayers in front of it every night since I had it, morning and evening. I love it so, it is so beautiful"⁴⁶ Whether this is true or not - the sailor's embellished memory, or Lady Jane's - is beside the point. The fact that Lady Jane tells the story at all indicates the overweening reverence in which the Shelleys were held at this time. It is possibly what gave rise to 'Marshall's overworked analogy between Mary and the girl in the Hans Andersen tale who tortures her hands weaving nettle shirts for the salvation of her brothers' which 'seemed wholly appropriate to this history of a life of sacrifice.'⁴⁷ It certainly explains how Helen Moore came to describe Mary's life after Percy's death as 'the tomb from which her lord had risen.' Even in 1928 we find that this has not disappeared as a way of seeing the Shelleys: 'From the moment of her birth to within a few years of her death, she was cruelly tortured by circumstance. The mere facts and accidents of life betrayed her at every turn[...] We shall see the equanimity and unexampled meekness with which she bore the bludgeonings of fate.'⁴⁸ The opening pages of Richard Church's short biography reveal a picture of Mary as the suffering martyr that is directly descended from those earlier hagiographic portraits.

When R. Glynn Grylls was writing her biography in the later 1930s the Shelley papers had passed into the hands of a new, less despotic generation of the family. She

⁴⁴ See André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1929), pp. 107-8.

⁴⁵ Rolleston, pp. 64-65.

⁴⁶ Rolleston, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁷ Seymour, p. 554.

⁴⁸ Richard Church, *Mary Shelley* (London: Gerald Howe, 1928), p. 9.

therefore had both a wealth of published and unpublished material at her disposal, but also countless conflicting views and mythologisations to wade through. Although later biographers and even reviewers of the time have criticised her biography for skipping too lightly over problematic episodes of Mary Shelley's life (such as the blackmailing she suffered in later years),⁴⁹ and was described by Emily Sunstein, one of Mary Shelley's more recent biographers, as producing a portrait of a 'morbid moper',⁵⁰ Grylls should be given more credit than this. She makes an attempt to explain the misconceptions that arose, especially concerning Mary's strained relationship with Percy and her depression in the months leading up to his death. The Shelleys' two small children, Clara and William, had died within a year of each other, in September 1818 and June 1819. Percy and Mary were both distraught, but her grief was apparently deeper and lasted much longer than his. His infatuations with Emilia Viviani in 1821 and Jane Williams in 1822 did not help, and by the time of his death in July 1822, relations between them were at a very low ebb. Mary Shelley was seen by those around them as cold and cruel to Percy, but Grylls explains:

In her first extremity of grief Mary put up obstacles to sympathy that laid the foundation of misunderstandings that she was never to have the opportunity wholly to resolve. Only a year after the birth of Percy Florence, when she was "beginning to look a little consoled", there came the Emilia Viviani incident; she showed great fortitude in facing this, but a year later its after-effects and the strain of another pregnancy told on her, so that in the last days at Lerici she showed a morbid sensitiveness [...] that might have seemed unreasonable and petty to any one ignorant of the background.⁵¹

In the note appended to this passage, Grylls makes specific reference to Trelawny as one of those who was indeed ignorant of this background, and the implication is that this is partly what lay behind his attacks in the *Records*. This also partially refutes Sunstein's other complaint about Grylls that she 'more or less confirmed [Trelawny's] views.'⁵²

However, what Grylls did perpetuate was the image of a Mary Shelley whose most important contribution to literary history was principally as Percy Shelley's

⁴⁹ See review in *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 January 1938, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Sunstein, p. 399.

⁵¹ R. Glynn Grylls, *Mary Shelley: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 112.

⁵² Sunstein, p. 7.

wife. This can be seen in her treatment of the period just after the publication of *Frankenstein*, when the family had settled in Italy to begin their years of exile. Here is Grylls' description:

Mary watched for reviews of *Frankenstein* and considered to what she should turn her attention next: a play about Charles I or Beatrice Cenci, whose story Shelley had found in manuscript form at Leghorn and was anxious for her to undertake[...] or biographies of the Commonwealth men, which was Godwin's suggestion. The theme of the one was beyond her powers and she had not access to a good library for the other; but the symptoms of *cacoethes scribendi* were not acute, and she was content in happy tranquillity to read, to study Italian and Latin, and, best of all, to watch Shelley's health improve in the genial climate.⁵³

Although it may or may not be true that she was happy to watch her husband's health improve, Grylls is certainly happy to sideline Mary Shelley's own literary activities in favour of her wifely role.

It does not compare favourably with a description of the same period given by Muriel Spark in *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Shelley* (1951). Spark says: 'Mary was now looking for the plot for her next novel, and at first considered, at Shelley's urging, using the theme which Shelley later dramatised in *The Cenci*, at Mary's suggestion./ They were thus encouraging each other to further creative efforts[...]'⁵⁴ Apart from the fact that Spark's description is shorter (because her biography is much briefer and less exhaustive than Grylls'), it is the difference between the two biographers' tone and emphasis that is the most striking feature of the two extracts. Unlike Grylls, who presents Mary's search for material as a rather whimsical, half-hearted activity, Spark's more decisive tone – 'Mary was now looking for the plot for her next novel' – indicates Mary's engagement in positive intellectual activity, and Spark also clearly presents Mary and Percy as sharing an intellectual partnership of equals, rather than a Mary content with wifely duties. Spark's study, which is divided into biographical and critical sections, marked a water-shed in Mary Shelley studies. Although hers did not supersede Grylls' work, it constituted a valuable supplement to the earlier book in the seriousness with which it

⁵³ Grylls, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁴ Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley* (London: Constable, 1988), p. 63. This is a revised edition of her *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Shelley*, which was originally published in 1951.

treated Mary Shelley's writings, and not just *Frankenstein*: Spark included an abridgement of *The Last Man* (not then available) so that she could pay it some much needed critical attention. It has been suggested that Spark was one of the first to note the 'doppelgänger' theme in *Frankenstein*, which has since become a central assumption in more recent criticism.⁵⁵ It is also arguably the first piece of criticism that avoided treating Mary Shelley's principal work as freakish accident (such as can be seen in Helen Moore's assessment), or her other works as simple *romans à clef*.⁵⁶

It may be the case that this new critical interest (which was continued only two years later in Elizabeth Nitchie's volume of biographical criticism, discussed below), was inadvertently sparked by the publication of Mary Shelley's letters and journals in 1944 and 1947 respectively (the first since Lady Shelley's heavily censored editions had appeared in *Shelley and Mary* of 1882). Inadvertently, because their editor, Frederick L. Jones intended them (the Journal especially) as a contribution to Percy Shelley scholarship: 'Mary Shelley's journal is the most important single document in Shelley biography' he announces in the first sentence of his introduction.⁵⁷ But he goes on to lament how remiss Mary Shelley was as a diary-keeper: 'To the frequent lapses in the daily entries we must add Mary's failure to make even a reasonably complete record of events[...] During 1820 and 1821 Mary made almost regular daily entries, but they are exceedingly brief, often no more than the barest indication of what Mary has read.' However he charitably concedes that, 'in spite of these deficiencies, however, the journal is the richest mine of information about Shelley's daily life: where he lived, where he went, and whom he saw from day to day.'⁵⁸ Jones seems to regard the journal as the work of an incompetent biographer, who has reneged on an agreement, rather than as the private document it originally was: meant only for the eyes of Mary and Percy (whatever Cecily Cardew may think about diaries).⁵⁹ Jones' chauvinism is also intriguing in view of the fact that, as has been shown, the Mary Shelley industry itself was not inconsiderable by this time; yet in his

⁵⁵ Frederick S. Frank, 'Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: A Register of Research', *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 40 (1983), 163-188, p. 166.

⁵⁶ As can be seen, for example in Walter E. Peck's 1923 essay, 'The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley', published in *PMLA*, v. 38. Peck was primarily a Percy Shelley scholar who published the article as a contribution to the biography of the poet.

⁵⁷ *Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), p. vii.

⁵⁸ *Mary Shelley's Journal*, p. viii.

⁵⁹ 'It is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication.' says Cecily in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* ([1895] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 329.

introduction and editorship he does not once consider the journals as a contribution to Mary Shelley scholarship (to an almost comic extent, as can be seen from the above quotations). However, the new publications escape Jones' initial intentions for them, and are very possibly the trigger for the first stirrings of Mary Shelley criticism that appeared in the 1950s with Spark and Nitchie's work.

Elizabeth Nitchie's *Mary Shelley: Author of 'Frankenstein'* (1953) clearly marks, even in its subtitle, a change in perception. Mary Shelley has begun to be identified as an artist in her own right, the author of a text which is not only famous, but important too. However, Nitchie's text is primarily a biography, and one whose principal sources are Mary Shelley's own work. This also began the trend for conflating biography and criticism that has been seen to dog the critical assessment of Mary Shelley ever since. Although Nitchie was seen as instrumental in bringing forward all of Mary Shelley's work in her criticism, and was the editor of the novella, *Mathilda* (never published before 1959), her approach in her biography is ultimately reductive. Like Florence Marshall before her, she seeks to steer a course between the idolisers and the iconoclasts, and decides that 'she deserves the sneers and innuendoes of Trelawny [...] as little as she does the blind adulation of Lady Shelley or Mrs Marshall'.⁶⁰ It is through Mary Shelley's works that Nitchie claims we will find the answers to the questions 'What, then, was she really like? What sort of temperament did she have? What sort of mind? How did she look upon her husband, her family, her friends, her world?'.⁶¹ Nitchie's central thesis demands lengthy plot synopses in order to illustrate the biographical parallels she wishes to make:

Their companionship knew happy years when Verney, having married Adrian's sister, was living in Windsor Castle, devoting himself to reading and writing under his friend's encouragement[...]. Adrian was for a time considered mad by those who had no sympathy with his liberal ideas. His early plans for England, for diminishing the power of the aristocracy, effecting a greater equalization of wealth and privilege, and converting the government into a perfect republican system, ran directly counter to his mother's schemes to re-establish the House of Windsor on the throne. He was sent to Dunkeld[...]⁶²

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Nitchie, *Mary Shelley: Author of 'Frankenstein'* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. xii.

⁶¹ Nitchie, p. xiv.

⁶² Nitchie, p. 69.

These kinds of passages, which constitute mini-biographies of fictional characters, combined with descriptions of situations in Mary Shelley's own life have an odd effect: the characters of Mary Shelley's fiction seem to occupy the same plane of reality as the people in her life.

The confusion thickens in the following sorts of passages: 'In spite of frail health, Adrian survived the plague, together with Verney, Verney's little son Evelyn, and Clara, the daughter of Raymond and Perdita (Byron and Claire), whom Adrian and Verney loved, as Shelley and Mary had loved Allegra. Evelyn died, like the real Clara, William, and Allegra, of a fever. The fictitious Clara and Adrian drowned when their little boat was wrecked in a storm off the coast of Italy.'⁶³ The text of Mary Shelley's life has thoroughly mingled with the text of her fictions, so in Nitchie's biography they almost become interchangeable. It must be pointed out that Mary Shelley sanctioned this view of her own work. Nitchie quotes an extract from one of Mary Shelley's letters to Maria Gisborne: "'Have you read *Lodore*?[...] If you did read it, did you recognize any of Shelley's and my early adventures – when we were in danger of being starved in Switzerland – and could get no dinner at an inn in London?'"⁶⁴ But even this cannot countenance Nitchie's dismissive comment that 'Not gifted in invention, she turned to actuality for character and incident.'⁶⁵ Nor can it wholly justify Nitchie's belief that the sole interest in her later books is that 'she could not help putting into her writing a large share not only of what she thought but also of what she experienced.'⁶⁶ Nitchie may acknowledge Mary Shelley's comments 'on social problems, on politics, on education, on science', but she falls into the familiar pattern of praising them for their '*accidental* value for the student of the nineteenth century.'⁶⁷ In the final evaluative chapter of her study, Nitchie's tone, although ostensibly complimentary, has the cumulative effect of a school report: 'Mary can sustain a mood and create a distinct picture [...] She can catch the spirit of a human scene [...] Mary's style has considerable range [...] Mary could also write simply and directly [...]'⁶⁸

Betty T. Bennett has more complex views on the role played by autobiography

⁶³ Nitchie, p. 72.

⁶⁴ Nitchie, p. 76.

⁶⁵ Nitchie, p. xiv.

⁶⁶ Nitchie, p. xiv.

⁶⁷ Nitchie, p. xiii (my emphasis).

⁶⁸ Nitchie, pp. 192 & 194.

in Mary Shelley's work, placing it in the wider context of the Romantic project as a whole: 'In her discussion of the works of others, she voiced many of the theories of art that guided P.B. Shelley's writing and her own: she praised "the author's intrusion of self in a work of art."' ⁶⁹ Bennett also deplores the continuous trend (even up to the present day) of sidelining the political import of Mary Shelley's work apart from *Frankenstein*: 'Like *Valperga*, *Warbeck* is grounded in literary history, with fictionalised characters interpolated to represent her condemnation of political systems predicated on power. Critics ignored or objected to the importance of the historical aspects of the novel, and instead reviewed the novel as a love story that showed off the "poetical imagination" of the "fair author."' ⁷⁰ Similarly, when *Lodore* and *Falkner* were published, Bennett argues, the fact that '[Mary Shelley] used private politics as a paradigm for public politics' was greeted with 'tacit relief'. ⁷¹ At the risk of diminishing Nitchie's work, it could be said that for all its good intentions of foregrounding Mary Shelley's overlooked later writings, her view is ultimately that Mary Shelley was the kind of polite 'lady novelist' to be found in Amanda Prantera's novel, *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion 163 Years After His Lordship's Death* (1987) in which the fictional Byron, frets over a piece of gossip: 'Mightn't Mrs Shelley then have passed it on to someone else, or even put it in a novel? Lady novelists were a scurvy breed.' ⁷²

Whatever we may think of it now, the wider scope of Elizabeth Nitchie's work was highly regarded for many years after, and had a notable influence on later biographical work. It may have helped to kick-start the slow rise in critical interest in Mary Shelley that gathered speed with the rise of feminism in the 1960s and 70s, and came to a head in the late 1970s and early 80s, but it also validated the tendency to conflate Mary Shelley's life and work. None of the biographies produced in this period, with perhaps the exception of Jane Dunn's *Moon in Eclipse* (1978), added new material or ideas to the perception of Mary Shelley's life. In fact it was this period that could be said to have seen the solidification of various myths that had up

⁶⁹ *Mary Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, vol. 3 in *Lives of the Great Romantics III: Godwin, Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley by their Contemporaries*, ed. by John Mullan, 3 VOLS (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), p. xiv.

⁷⁰ Bennett, p. xv.

⁷¹ Bennett, p. xv.

⁷² Amanda Prantera, *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion 163 Years After His Lordship's Death* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), p. 96.

until now been floating about in the academic ether. The biographies that appeared were (in chronological order): Eileen Bigland's *Mary Shelley* (1959), Margaret Leighton's *Shelley's Mary: A Life of Mary Godwin Shelley* (1973), Jane Dunn's *Moon in Eclipse: A Life of Mary Shelley* (1978), Janet Harris's *The Woman Who Created Frankenstein: A Portrait of Mary Shelley* (1979), and Bonnie Rayford Neumann's *The Lonely Muse: A Critical Biography of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1979). Nearly all of them show the effects of the rise of the New Biography: in their use of novelistic narrative some of them are almost indistinguishable from the early novels on the Shelleys discussed in the next chapter.

Muriel Spark has said that, 'I have always disliked the sort of biography which states "X lay on the bed and watched the candle flickering on the roof-beams," when there is no evidence that X did so.'⁷³ Unfortunately, by this time these were exactly the kinds of biographies being written. If she had read Eileen Bigland's 1959 biography, she might have found plenty to feed her irritation. We come upon William Godwin: 'As he made his way to Miss Hays's party he reminded himself that Mrs Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was a remarkable piece of work which he looked forward to discussing with the author.'⁷⁴ Margaret Leighton, as well as writing in a similar, if not more fictive vein,⁷⁵ also demonstrates in her title (*Shelley's Mary*) that despite the burgeoning interest in Mary Shelley as an autonomous literary being, there still existed threads of the old-fashioned view of Mary Shelley as important for being Percy's wife and not much else. Another biography produced at this time was by Noel Bertram Gerson, entitled *Daughter of Earth and Water* (New York: William Morrow, 1973). Gerson was an overflowingly prolific writer, with a number of aliases, both male and female, specialising in biographical fictions, and fictionalised biographies.⁷⁶ From a description of it that appeared in a bibliography ten years later, it would seem to fit neatly with other biographies produced at the same time: 'Purports to be "the life story of the author of *Frankenstein* and her tragic, all-consuming love for her husband.'" but turns out to be a factually irresponsible and critically weak biography[...]'⁷⁷

⁷³ Spark, p. xii.

⁷⁴ Eileen Bigland, *Mary Shelley* (London: Cassell, 1959), p. 2.

⁷⁵ It opens: 'The painting had hung over the mantel ever since Mary Godwin could remember and she never failed to look up at it when she entered the room.' – Margaret Leighton, *Shelley's Mary: A Life of Mary Godwin Shelley* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 3.

⁷⁶ *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series* (Detroit: Gale, 2000), v.82, pp. 143-46.

⁷⁷ Frank, pp. 165-6.

The biographies of the later 1970s – Dunn’s *Moon in Eclipse* and Neumann’s *The Lonely Muse* – are more scholarly works which bear the marks of greater academic interest in Mary Shelley. Both also bear the marks of Elizabeth Nitchie’s influence: Dunn in her use of Mary Shelley’s fiction as biographical source, and Neumann, more explicitly, in her extensive quotation of the earlier critic, who seems to have been something of a guiding light. Dunn’s *Moon in Eclipse* is somewhat soberer than those texts produced earlier in the decade, and was regarded by later bibliographers as also comparatively valuable. Although Frederick S. Frank is doubtful, believing it to be ‘a somewhat unbalanced and speculative biography which attempts to derive new insights from old facts’,⁷⁸ Robert D. Spector is more generous and points out that it ‘at least employs the most recent scholarly discoveries to present a sound account of the author’s life and to suggest a remarkable woman, eclipsed by her own modesty and her relationship to her husband.’⁷⁹ Dunn also differs from her predecessors in her background research: like them, she clearly wishes to create a compelling narrative, but instead looks to historical detail, rather than emotive speculation (whatever Frank may believe) to help her achieve her ends. Where Eileen Bigland may have invented William Godwin’s thought processes on his way to meet Mary Wollstonecraft, Dunn describes their wedding using social and geographical facts that render her account equally vivid, yet more plausible:

So it was that on 29 March 1797 her mother and father stepped out from the gloom of old St. Pancras church into the spring air.[...] As they walked down through the churchyard and across the fields into Somers Town they looked an odd couple. Mary Wollstonecraft was nearly thirty-eight, tall and handsome with soft, mouse-brown hair [...] Beside her Godwin at forty-one was of smaller build, sharp-featured, with large striking eyes [...] they walked home together across fields damp and clumped with primroses and cowslips, for the River Fleet still flowed past the church from the heights of Hampstead and Highgate ponds.⁸⁰

The title best indicates the kind of Mary Shelley we might find: and what we find is not radically different to previous images of her. She is a talent eclipsed by her

⁷⁸ Frank, p. 165.

⁷⁹ Robert D. Spector, *The English Gothic: A Bibliographic Guide to Writers from Horace Walpole to Mary Shelley* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983), p. 249.

⁸⁰ Jane Dunn, *Moon in Eclipse: A Life of Mary Shelley* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), pp. 5-6.

husband, who still needs to be drawn out from under his shadow, over a century after Florence Marshall proposed the same project. And this also despite the publication in the years leading up to Dunn's biography of several pieces of influential *Frankenstein* criticism: most notably Christopher Small's *Ariel Like a Harpy* (1972), Marc Rubenstein's "My Accursed Origin": The Search for the Mother in *Frankenstein*' (1976), and Ellen Moers' first suggestion of the novel as a 'birth myth' in *Literary Women* (1976).

As I mentioned earlier, Bonnie Rayford Neumann's *The Lonely Muse* demonstrates a powerful debt to Elizabeth Nitchie's work. But Neumann distinguishes hers from previous works by taking the angle that her conflation of the life and work will provide 'an exploration of that single condition which came to dominate her personal emotional life and her writing as well – the condition of loneliness.'⁸¹ Thus the Mary Shelley we encountered earlier – the 'miserable moper' in Sunstein's words – does not seem far away. Neumann confirms this in her initial descriptions of Mary Shelley's life: '[...] fifty-three years of almost unbelievable heartache. Like so many people buffeted about by fate, kept insecure by accident and isolated by sudden death, Mary felt herself to be terribly alone'. Later, we learn that she is 'the victim of a childhood spent primarily in a household not only incompatible with her nature but, in fact often openly hostile to her.' Neumann goes on 'She attempted, at age sixteen, to change her lonely state by running away with the man she loved – a married man – the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley', and concludes that 'this act, seen at the time as a leap to freedom, was to lead to a series of events which would trap her so totally in her isolation that, for the rest of her life, she would be unable to escape it.'⁸² Neumann is clearly attempting to make an engaging narrative, and it certainly reads dramatically, but is too similar to the kind of romantic overstatement to be found in both the earlier biographies and the more overtly fictional texts that will be discussed in later chapters, to be taken as serious biography. It can also be seen as a further example of how the very incidents of Mary Shelley's life – elopement, illegitimate children, suicides – leaves many writers unable to resist the temptation to fictionalise.

Janet Harris's *The Woman Who Created Frankenstein* (1979) was, according

⁸¹ Bonnie Rayford Neumann, *The Lonely Muse: A Critical Biography of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1979), pp. 1-2.

⁸² Neumann, pp. 4-5.

to Spector's bibliography, 'designed for a young audience'.⁸³ Thus, its prime concern is to create an informative and immediate narrative, rather than to defend Mary Shelley's reputation, or to bolster her critical standing. Thus, although she may still have been seen as 'eclipsed' and a 'muse', Harris's text also shows a parallel thread of her development in the popular imagination as an autonomous literary figure.⁸⁴ It opens on a vividly imagined depiction of the night at Diodati in 1816 that Mary Shelley had described in the 1831 Introduction. Harris elaborates: 'It was a perfect night for ghost stories. Outside the stone-fronted mansion that was called Villa Diodati a cold wind roared, echoed in the valleys of the towering Swiss Alps, bringing rain that splashed in spurts against the shuttered windows and poured in sheets from the high gables.'⁸⁵ Not only does Harris's text draw the reader in by describing a usefully colourful episode in Mary Shelley's life, but it is, moreover, an episode that places the creation of *Frankenstein* at the centre of the construction of her identity for an unfamiliar audience. She now appeared to be slowly shedding (at least for a popular readership) her perennial and apparently indissoluble association with her husband. It was now her most famous work which defined her.

By the time Anne K. Mellor was writing her *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, which appeared in 1988, the effects of a burgeoning academic interest in both Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein* had begun to filter through to the biographical texts. The feminist re-discovery of Mary Shelley had gathered speed at the end of the 1970s, and the publication of two seminal critical works in 1979 confirmed her entry into the academic canon. These were Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's chapter on *Frankenstein* in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and a collection of essays edited by George Levine and U.C. Knoepfelmacher, *The Endurance of Frankenstein*. Moreover, the publication of Mellor's work came very soon after the publication in 1983 and 1987 of new, complete, editions of Mary Shelley's letters and journals (edited by Betty T. Bennett, and Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert respectively). Mellor made use of these new sources and produced a biography that, like Muriel Spark's and Elizabeth Nitchie's before it, simultaneously constituted a major contribution to

⁸³ Spector, p. 249.

⁸⁴ As I shall show in later chapters it was also films of *Frankenstein* (regarded by many critics as being simply travesties of the novel without further interest) that were partially responsible for this development.

⁸⁵ Janet Harris, *The Woman Who Created Frankenstein: A Portrait of Mary Shelley* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 3.

Mary Shelley criticism. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, (the years between publication of Nitchie's work and Mellor's) the biographies produced tended to be more concerned with relating the story of Mary Shelley's life in dramatic narrative terms, and so less emphasis was laid on her role as an artist: they were 'conventional' biographies in other words. But with the appearance of Mellor's *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* we return to the kind of combined work of biography and criticism to be found in Nitchie's text. It is also interesting to note that, in the same way that Spark and Nitchie produced their biographies soon after the publication of the first editions of Mary Shelley's personal writings, Mellor's work appeared soon after the publication of the new editions of her letters and journals. The renewed interest in these biographical sources clearly produced at both times (the 1950s and the 1980s) corresponding interest in Mary Shelley's life as an adjunct of and source for criticism of her works.

There are, however, clear differences: the intervening thirty years have seen major developments in literary theory and criticism, and also, as has been noted, in the perception of Mary Shelley and her work. Mellor's work forms part of the feminist reappraisal of many previously neglected authors which took place at this time: it is more theoretically sophisticated than Nitchie's, and makes more complex assertions regarding the work; her tone is of a crusading champion, rather than of a patronising school-report. Mellor simply holds Mary Shelley's work in higher regard than did Nitchie. In contrast to the earlier critic's estimation of the work as a useful biographical source, Mellor believes it has more interesting things to tell us: 'Mary Shelley's fictions criticize the dominant romantic and patriarchal ideologies of her day. In their place Mary Shelley offered a more life-supporting ideology grounded on a new conception of the bourgeois family as ideally egalitarian.'⁸⁶ Not only is Mary Shelley's work characterised here as more overtly political than in previous biographies, it is also more *conscious*. The claim that her fictions 'criticize' and 'offer' viewpoints emphasises Mary Shelley's agency and conscious will in the creation of her own work. This too is a development. Previous criticism (but which is nonetheless cited approvingly by Mellor) had tended, in its concentration on either biography or biology, to emphasise the forces that worked on Mary Shelley despite her and, in a more simplistic form, to regard *Frankenstein* as an inexplicable anomaly

⁸⁶ Ann K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. xii.

in her literary career.⁸⁷ Mellor explicitly positions her work as revisionary.

In her analysis of *Frankenstein* Mellor makes a detailed comparison of Mary Shelley's original manuscript and the emendations made by Percy which made up the actual published text. She points out that the very stylistic faults complained about by George Levine in his essay in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, were precisely the result of the emendations made by Percy.⁸⁸ In this way she dismantles one of the main complaints against Mary Shelley that has kept her in the ranks of the 'minor' novelists. Mellor is careful to point out that her case is not 'to claim that Mary Shelley was a great prose stylist, but only that her prose, despite its tendency toward the abstract, sentimental, and even banal, is more direct and forceful than her husband's revisions.'⁸⁹ However, her analysis, valuable though it is, once again positions Mary Shelley as a rather wilting victim of the villain Percy Bysshe who once again has overshadowed her. There has been an occasional tendency for sympathetic biographers to illustrate their sympathy for Mary Shelley by striking a correspondingly negative attitude to her husband. This is a phenomenon we can see occurring in Richard Church's biography, in which he observes: 'Shelley with his insatiable greed for sympathy and comprehension had drained away her vitality. Giving her so much, lifting her up to a giddy intellectual and spiritual virtuosity, he had at the same time made terrible exactions.'⁹⁰ Just as we saw Percy elevated to the status of archangel at the expense of either Mary or Harriet, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme, and a growing tendency to demonise Percy has also developed. It perhaps reaches its climax with Mellor, who, in her efforts to present hers as the first real revision of Mary Shelley's reputation, slips into making other tendentious statements. In her chapter on *Frankenstein*, she claims that 'Mary Shelley created her myth single-handedly' because it is the only modern myth (unlike Robinson Crusoe, or Dracula, for example) that has no base in 'folklore or communal ritual practices'.⁹¹ This clearly takes no account of the explicit network of mythological allusion that permeates the novel, most importantly that of Prometheus which is invoked in the subtitle. It also takes no account of the contributions – albeit inadvertent – made by the other intellectuals (including Percy) with whom Mary

⁸⁷ Even in 1999 it was described as a 'strange fluke' by David Crane – see Crane, p. 44.

⁸⁸ Mellor, p. 60.

⁸⁹ Mellor, p. 62.

⁹⁰ Church, p. 83.

⁹¹ Mellor, pp. 38-9.

Shelley associated at the time. Mellor almost seems to want to claim that *Frankenstein* was created in an intellectual vacuum. She also claims that before Ellen Moers' formulation of *Frankenstein* as birth-myth, the novel had largely been dismissed as 'a badly written children's book', which even from the biographical/critical evidence presented in this chapter is patently untrue. She goes on to assert that the film industry, whilst capitalising on the main elements of the story, has 'overlooked the significance of the making and unmaking of the female monster.'⁹² As we shall see later, in the discussion of films in Chapter Five, *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), the hugely successful sequel to the equally successful *Frankenstein* of 1931, does exactly this, and moreover explicitly identifies Mary Shelley with the female monster by having the same actress play both roles.

From all this, a picture begins to emerge of the evolution of Mary Shelley's reputation. It is characterised by waves of action and reaction (a picture that is equally applicable to the case of Percy Shelley). Its contributors thrust and parry, forcing each other into ever more extreme positions. Thus, a mythology grew up around her life-story as a result of the various biographical arguments at work in the nineteenth century, and in the later decades of the twentieth century critical perceptions were shaped in a similar way. To counteract one set of perceptions – for example that Mary Shelley was miserable and talentless – another has to be put in its place – for example that Percy Shelley was artistically bullying and in fact subsumed Mary's talent into his own. A review of Emily Sunstein's *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (1989) praises it as 'intelligent, full and well-researched [...] which avoids taking sides and casting Percy in a demonised role.'⁹³ By this time such demonisation had clearly become a notably entrenched practice. Despite this innovation, however, Sunstein begins her biography in by now familiar terms – it points out first that Mary Shelley is 'the only stellar English Romantic author for whom there is no complete and definitive biography', and moreover that her 'image has become clouded during the almost century and a half since her death'. But Sunstein reassures us, 'This book aims to rectify both of these inequities.'⁹⁴ Again we are presented with a work that claims to be revisionary in one way or another, and from the glowing reviews on the back of the paperback edition, a revision that was

⁹² Mellor, p. 39.

⁹³ Susan Matthews, 'Fictional Prose' in 'The Nineteenth Century: The Romantic Period', *Year's Work in English Studies*, 73 (1992), 336-40, p. 404.

⁹⁴ Sunstein, p. 3.

seen as much needed. In the same way that Mellor sought to present Mary Shelley as a complex and conscious writer, Sunstein wishes to revise the image of Mary Shelley as pessimistic and drooping in her personal life, an image perpetuated by even her most sympathetic biographers. Sunstein contends that 'aspiration, enthusiasm, challenge, active mind and spirit, and optimism were among her cardinal qualities, contrary to the impression that she was temperamentally cool, quiet and pessimistic'.⁹⁵

But even with a biography so recent, we seem not to have reached the finale of the dance of the biographers. In 2000 Miranda Seymour took up her position on the floor, gliding past Sunstein with a new piece of biographical choreography. It is surely Sunstein to whom Seymour is alluding when she asserts that 'Mary Shelley is not the active, enthusiastic, optimistic woman described by recent biographers.'⁹⁶ However, Seymour, in distancing her work from that of her predecessors does not do so by simply stating the opposing viewpoint, which has so often been the case up until this point. She is sympathetic, but is more circumspect in praise of her subject, in what seems to be an attempt to arrest the radical shifts from praise to blame and back again. As well as pointing out Mary Shelley's tendency to depression, which was not helped by the seemingly endless series of misfortunes which dogged her, Seymour wishes also to point out that 'she taught herself how to survive. She remained, until the end of her life, generous, forgiving, tolerant and hopeful. The depression which she voiced in her journals was, we always need to remember, hidden from her friends.[...] One wonders how much more sympathy she might have gained if she had been a little less fiercely reserved.'⁹⁷ In attempting to draw Mary Shelley away from extremes of perception, Seymour's depiction of her is a little more finely calibrated than other biographies.

The difference in the kinds of portrait that Sunstein and Seymour wish to produce can be seen by comparing their methods in the treatment of two specific periods of Mary Shelley's life. One of these is less well-known than the more glamorous episodes of her elopement with Shelley, or the gathering at Diodati, but it is one that has provoked increasing controversy: that is her social and intellectual life in London in the years following the death of Percy Bysshe. In a much quoted letter

⁹⁵ Sunstein, p. 402.

⁹⁶ Seymour, p. 561.

⁹⁷ Seymour, p. 560.

about Mary Shelley, Trelawny described her to her step-sister, Claire Clairmont, as 'conventional in everything',⁹⁸ and in the *Records* as 'yearning for society'. It is a view that has been accepted to a greater or lesser extent by all subsequent biographers. That Mary Shelley generally led a more sedate existence in her life after Percy is not disputed, but the extent to which she 'hankered' after 'society' and the reasons for this have been the cause of much debate. Those with less sympathy (usually not her own biographers) tend to accept Trelawny's view and see her as having died a full-blooded Victorian, with all the implications that carries: mealy-mouthed, respectable, hypocritical, prudish, frankly dull. Her own biographers have been progressively more forgiving and understanding, pointing first to the fact that she was one of the few (if not the only) late Romantics who survived into middle -age, and further that, unlike Trelawny, she was on the wrong side of the double-standard that allowed men their sexual peccadilloes, but regarded impropriety in a woman more seriously.

Neither Seymour nor Sunstein condemns Mary Shelley for her courting of social acceptance, convincingly pointing out (as their predecessors have, too) that her life up until this point had been spent travelling erratically from place to place, carrying her books and babies wherever she went (little Clara and William dying as a result), as well as suffering a certain amount of social ostracism because of her elopement and cohabitation with a married man. It is therefore hardly surprising that she returned to England hoping for a slightly quieter life, both for herself, and more importantly for her young son. Emily Sunstein describes her gradual re-entry into the social life of London as a somewhat fraught process, hindered partly by her lack of funds: 'Doors had opened; however, Mary could not always enter [...] Her well-to-do new acquaintances lived at considerable distances from her; she could not walk to engagements in evening dress and often could not afford cabs, or the theater if asked to join people'.⁹⁹ She also suffered from the fact that her reputation tended to precede her: 'For the generality of women she was taboo because of her youthful liaison. Sometimes she was insultingly snubbed [...] Mainline feminists shunned her as an exemplar of sexual freedom that the movement generally repudiated for decades', and to cap it all 'her superiority was a handicap in a society in which literatae were

⁹⁸ Crane, p. 341.

⁹⁹ Sunstein, p. 305.

savagely caricatured'¹⁰⁰ Although she does indeed create a social circle for herself, we find the lament that 'if few were as brilliant as Paris had provided, she could not pick and choose freely.'¹⁰¹ Sunstein quotes an entry from Thomas Moore's journal that describes one of Mary's soirées, and in which he concludes "'very glad to be off'''.¹⁰²

Seymour's description of this same period is contrastingly much more lively. She disregards what social ostracism may have existed and describes many of the idiosyncratic people with whom Mary Shelley socialised and characterises them as 'a wide circle of professional literary acquaintances who did not hold her past against her, [...] her sociable father, and [...] a few broad-minded women who, sympathizing with her need for friendship and support, admired her intelligence and independent spirit.'¹⁰³ The unkind comments made by Thomas Moore - 'when he had not been the centre of attention' - are dismissed, and instead we are directed to the fact that he 'was insufficiently observant to be struck by the careful exclusiveness of her guest list.'¹⁰⁴ Seymour does not mean that Mary Shelley invited only the *crème de la crème*, but rather that she 'seemed anxious to keep away anybody who might gossip about her past.'¹⁰⁵ This might seem damaging to any account of Mary Shelley's life that seeks to distance itself from the Trelawnyan view of her, but as well as unapologetically presenting her behaviour as a pragmatic reaction to circumstance, Seymour, in contrast to Sunstein, renders a portrait of woman who is also much more in control of those circumstances. Where in Sunstein's rather desolate picture the Mary Shelley that emerges is a somewhat pathetic victim of others' injustices, Seymour's portrait is of a generally less beleaguered figure, who can indeed 'pick and choose' her friends.

There are also contrasting accounts of another episode in Mary Shelley's life which can be fruitfully compared. This is the much quoted exchange of letters between her and Trelawny in which, it is generally claimed, he proposed marriage. In their letters a flirtatious exchange culminates in Mary Shelley claiming she will always be called such because it is "'so pretty a name'''. Trelawny answers by pointing out that his is a good name too, the assertion usually taken to be the veiled proposition, and to which Mary Shelley counters "'My name will *never* be

¹⁰⁰ Sunstein, p. 306.

¹⁰¹ Sunstein, p. 306.

¹⁰² Sunstein, p. 308.

¹⁰³ Seymour, p. 413.

¹⁰⁴ Seymour, p. 416.

¹⁰⁵ Seymour, p. 417.

Trelawny.”¹⁰⁶ This is the interpretation that has been made by most of the major biographers, including Grylls, Spark, and Sunstein. Miranda Seymour’s interpretation is a radical diversion from these. Seymour first of all presents this episode as Mary Shelley hinting that she might marry him, but that when she makes her declaration that she will always keep her name, Trelawny’s answer is simply a relieved agreement that ‘he, too, took pride in his name’. Her subsequent refusal was therefore ‘rejecting something he had not, in fact, offered.’¹⁰⁷ As well as presenting Mary Shelley as unfortunately slightly humourless, it also depicts her as the instigator of this exchange. Where previous biographers have been at pains to counter negative depictions of her life, but in doing so paint her as a victim, Seymour creates a far more forceful being who stands forward from the illustrious crowd that surrounds her, and in other accounts, dominates her.

In the same year as Seymour’s book, but with less media fanfare, John Williams published his *Mary Shelley: A Literary Life*, as part of the Macmillan ‘Literary Lives’ series. It is a shorter book, but makes up for what it lacks in exhaustiveness by approaching its subject from a comparatively new angle. The brief, as set out by the general editor of the series, Richard Dutton, is to ‘follow the outline of the writers’ working lives, not in the spirit of traditional biography, but aiming to trace the professional, publishing and social contexts which shaped their writing.’¹⁰⁸ This approach could easily have led to a retread of her associations with very familiar Romantic colleagues, and a consequent minimisation of her abilities. However, because the focus is much wider than this and takes in the whole of Mary Shelley’s active working life, *Frankenstein* being one novel amongst a number of others, the literary context within which she can be placed therefore widens:

The context is established not so much by genre with reference to her own writing – though that remains important – as by the existence of other writers and their readers, writers like Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Inchbald, Brockden Brown, Disraeli, Bulwer-Lytton, Catherine Gore and Charles Dickens. When Mary Shelley begins to contribute to Dionysus Lardner’s biographical anthologies in the mid-1830s, a study of the literary life of Mary Shelley engages not just with

¹⁰⁶ Spark, p. 122. These quotations are taken from Spark because she quotes the correspondence most fully.

¹⁰⁷ Seymour, p. 419.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, p. i.

her contributions: it concerns itself with the phenomenon of Lardner's project as part of the literary life of England, the study of which begins to define and assess Shelley's contribution to it.¹⁰⁹

In this way Williams also demonstrates how the connections between life and work are more complex than the extremes of either denying connection at all (the death of the author), or making a 'who's really who' list of the author's friends in her fiction (which is more or less what Elizabeth Nitchie does). Thus instead of falling into the trap of simply equating life with writing and vice versa, that some previous biographers have failed to avoid, Williams is also thoroughly aware that his 'chronologically based approach should not assume that the biography explains the writing, nor should it exercise overall control of the critical processes at work.'¹¹⁰

Another important point in the rendering of Mary Shelley's life that Williams, if not unique in noting, is nonetheless unique in foregrounding as a complicating factor, is her own fictionalisation of her life:

The life we uncover (particularly as we read her own account of it in the Journals and letters) elides with the romantic fiction of her time; here again, Shelley was initiating the process herself, offering the reader her own life lived out in the manner prescribed by the Romantic myth she was involved (with Percy Shelley, Byron and others) in creating. Not only will she do this to herself, but biographers and critics – not surprisingly, given the drama and tragedy that seems to mark so much of her time with Percy Shelley – have frequently ended up writing her life in similar terms.¹¹¹

In this way the 'literary' life also becomes a pun; making a narrative from the raw data of a life is to fictionalise to a certain extent, something that Williams is himself thoroughly aware of in his own creation of narrative. He also points out the similarities between the melodramatic fiction of the time (Brockden Brown and Maria Edgeworth) and the actual narrative of Mary Shelley's early life, and proposes that in reading these fictions she could hardly fail to relate them to her own experience, and thus begin to perceive it in these terms. Thus a process came into being which was to continue throughout her life, ably assisted by the continuous stream of unfortunate

¹⁰⁹ Williams, p. 4.

¹¹⁰ Williams, p. 3.

¹¹¹ Williams, pp. 5-6.

events that befell her. In this way Williams takes Mary Shelley studies into a whole new arena of debate.

We have thus seen a gradual development in the biographical studies of Mary Shelley, from helpless victim both of the misfortunes she suffered, and of artistic and intellectual forces beyond her control, to someone who had a far more positive role to play in her own life, and a writer whose fictionalisation of her own life was a deliberate strategy rather than the resort of one bereft of imagination. Although Williams points out how close Mary Shelley's fiction came to her life, and indeed quotes from it to show how it did this, it is to bring this phenomenon into relief as interesting in itself, partly because of the role it played in Mary Shelley's very deliberate and conscious efforts to lift her dead husband's reputation into the pantheon of English literature. Because of her father-in-law's veto on any biography of his son being published, the first editions of Percy's complete works (published in 1839) were handily interspersed with explanatory notes in which she managed to secrete much biographical information. For this reason she has been credited with pioneering the tradition of biographical criticism which was to find its most comfortable home in nineteenth-century Shelley studies.¹¹² But as her life wore on, she began also deliberately to mythologize his life, and her life with him. This she did partly for the same reasons that she sought to elevate his reputation as a poet: to assuage both her grief at his death, and also her remorse at her treatment of him in the last months of their relationship. As I mentioned earlier, at the time of Percy's death relations between them were difficult, and it was her self-lacerating grief at his unexpected death, rendering so much unsaid, that drove her to boost his reputation. Coupled with the growing climate of religious and moral fervour in Victorian Britain which could not accommodate a love of Percy's poetry with his atheism, this led, unsurprisingly, to her gradual de-radicalising of his life and ideas. Seymour claims that evidence of this can be seen in her, now much-quoted, 1831 introduction to the new edition of *Frankenstein*. As well as finally furnishing an explanation for how she came by the central idea of the story, Mary also managed, by referring to Percy as 'my husband', to convey the idea that by the summer of 1816 she and Percy were married. Seymour also points out how before this, in an introduction to a new edition of her father's novel, *Caleb Williams*, she had already 'carefully obscured the date of her parents'

¹¹² Spark, p. ix; Sunstein, p. 4.

wedding'.¹¹³ The project of fictionalising the lives both of herself and of her associates, was not the last resort of a failed writer, but rather a conscious attempt to control the images of them that were being produced at the time. Hence the subsequent wars that broke out over the various life stories can be seen in the wider context of Mary Shelley's own contribution to the fictionalising process. As Miranda Seymour points out in her account of the 'Shelley wars', 'We should not [...] be too hard on [Lady] Jane [Shelley]; in her diligent promotion of Shelley as wistful dreamer, cruelly misunderstood by those who did not know him personally, she was only pursuing the course already marked out by Mary.'¹¹⁴

But Mary Shelley was not alone in her dalliance with the truth. As Williams points out, the earliest biographers of the Shelleys, notably the first (abandoned) biography written by Percy's friend Hogg, were as inclined to romanticise: 'When Thomas Jefferson Hogg set about writing up the whirlwind romance between [...] Percy Bysshe Shelley and the teenage Mary Godwin, he did so as though it were just that, a chapter from a novel. Fact or fiction, Hogg did the job so well that it has since become virtually impossible to think of it in any other way.'¹¹⁵ Ian Hamilton, in his study of biographies of the period, observes that the process of fictionalisation to be found in so many nineteenth-century biographies usually took flight during the 'deathbed scene': 'Somewhat in the manner of his subjects, the life-writer found in death-writing a kind of sweated-for sense of liberation and fulfilment. Unshackled at last, he was able to demonstrate that even official biographers could *write*.'¹¹⁶ It is perhaps this as much as anything that has led many writers in the twentieth century to unhandcuff themselves from history altogether and make a break for the open fields of fiction.

¹¹³ Seymour, p. 408. Her parents married while Mary Wollstonecraft was pregnant with Mary.

¹¹⁴ Seymour, p. 557.

¹¹⁵ Williams, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Hamilton, p. 140.

2. 'Kiss me, Percy!': Mary Shelley in Prose Fiction, 1930s - 1960s.

Prose fictions containing depictions of the Shelleys began appearing in the 1930s. Genre boundaries between biography and fiction became increasingly blurred: as became clear in Chapter 1, biography has always been a discourse permeated by fictivity; similarly, fictional narratives began increasingly to focus on single historical figures (although this was more noticeable in drama than the novel). The blurred genre boundaries are exemplified by André Maurois' *Ariel*, classified by most bibliographers, biographers, and critics as a biography but which could equally well be discussed as the first fictional biography of Shelley and his circle. Its subtitle alone, 'A Shelley Romance', set the tone, and it had a formidable influence on later novels about the Shelleys. Although Maurois undoubtedly meant 'romance' in the older sense of flight of fancy or adventure, its later usage as a synonym for a love-story can certainly be detected in some of *Ariel*'s characterisations. Thus, as well as the blurring of genre boundaries, the rise of romance is partly responsible for the appearance of the Shelleys in fiction. As shall become clear, the emergence of romance fiction as we know it today began in the 1930s and its popularity grew over the next few decades, sweeping other genres, such as historical fiction, into its powerful vortex of conventions. As a result of the various conventions in the genre that developed and solidified over the years, the figure of Mary Shelley comes ever more sharply into focus, until the early 1960s, when a novel appeared by Guy Bolton, entitled *The Olympians* (1961): it was ostensibly about Percy Bysshe Shelley, but the story was told almost entirely from Mary Shelley's point of view.

The creeping influence of the films, *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) can also be felt in many of these texts, and its corresponding effect on perceptions of the figure of Mary Shelley should not be discounted. The films were, after all, extremely popular and successful. The credits of *Frankenstein* announce quietly that it is based on a novel by 'Mrs Percy Bysshe Shelley', but in *The Bride of Frankenstein*, not only do they refer instead to the novel by 'Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley' as inspiration, but the opening prologue depicts Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Byron in conversation about the book. As I have already pointed out, the dominant tenor of most of the texts discussed in this chapter is

romantic, but in, for example, J. H. Pollock's *The Moth and the Star* (1937), another, more sinister, tone can be detected, especially in relation to the character of Mary Shelley. In this novel we see the beginnings of her gothicisation, a process which only really gets underway in later decades (and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter).

At the beginning of this period, Mary Shelley's critical and popular profile is still dwarfed by that of her husband, and so the prose fictions that I shall be discussing in this chapter, published between 1933 and 1961, do not have her as their central character. The occasion for most of these novels is the fascination Percy Shelley inspires in their authors. However, although it may have been his life-story that was the initial motivation to write, the results in some cases seem to belie their authors' original plans. Bolton's novel is one example, but Catherine I. Dodd's *Eagle-Feather* (1933), also escapes its author's apparent intentions. Although in a preface she describes it as a novel about the poet, he does not appear until nearly a third of the way through the text, which covers the period from Mary Wollstonecraft's childhood to Percy's death. With its dynastic structure, it also fits more comfortably on the biography side of a genre boundary which for Dodd is only slightly smudged rather than blurred. As such it stands as a bridging text between the biographies and the fiction. Because of its wide focus, for example, Dodd's novel shows how in the early novels Mary Shelley tends to appear as one amongst a larger cast of characters, much as she does in the biographies of Percy Shelley. Although Dodd invents dialogue, and makes some use of free indirect discourse, she also sticks closely to the documented history of her characters, and her prose has much of the hedging, careful manner of the biographer.

She begins her novel with a preface explaining the sources of her inspiration. The title of the novel, the reader learns, is taken from a poem by Browning, 'An Eagle-Feather', which describes his meeting with a man who had met Shelley in his youth. Dodd includes the poem as an epigraph to her text, and in the preface describes her own meeting with Browning. Dodd tells us how 'An astonishing whisper from a school-friend enlightened me [of Browning's presence] and I moved nearer to look at him, my heart beating furiously.' Once she has plucked up the courage to speak to him, she asks him to relate the incident where he 'met the man who had seen Shelley.' As told by Dodd, Browning then relates how (with the same

kind of awed reverence held by Dodd) he had heard the man 'telling the bookseller [at Hookham's] the exact spot where he had once talked to Shelley', and Browning's response was to be 'overcome with emotion'.¹ Thus, from the opening pages Dodd's text is caught in a web of hearsay and second-hand accounts which fetishise the cultural figure of the Poet. As well as being able to conjure up the presence of Shelley in writing about him, Dodd can place herself alongside her heroes in the rarefied regions of Art and Poetry by declaring her text to be a fictional one rather than a biography.

Dodd carries out her process of fictionalisation in various ways. For instance, she inserts dialogue where there might have been description, such as at Mary and Percy's auspicious first meeting:

'You are Mary,' said Shelley.
'I am Mary,' she replied.
He looked into her eyes. 'Fanny will be glad to have you at home,' he said. Then he glanced up at her mother's picture. 'You are like her, though Fanny is too, in a way.'
'I am glad you think so,' said Mary.
'I reverence your mother, she was a great woman,' he said; then he turned suddenly and left her. There were tears in Mary's eyes. 'Fanny and Jane are right,' she said to herself. 'He is like no mortal on earth. He is like a god.'²

Perhaps the stilted nature of this exchange could be said to express the shyness and embarrassment of its participants, however, it seems more convincing that it is Dodd's own shyness in the face of her illustrious characters that made her unable to give them much more than banalities to express themselves. She is also hampered by the sheer enormity of the task she has set herself: her cast of characters is wide-ranging, taking in Mary Wollstonecraft's early life, her friendship with Fanny Blood, her sisters, her wanderings in France at the time of the Revolution, William Godwin and the circle of London literary people they both knew. Dodd covers all of this before finally introducing the reader to Percy Bysshe Shelley. The novel goes on to describe his family, his first loves, his wanderings with Harriet, Hogg and so on. Dodd also wishes to take every opportunity to narrate incidents from the point-of-view of their protagonists, so, for instance, at the end of the summer of 1816 the reader leaves the

¹ Catherine I. Dodd, *Eagle-Feather* (London: Jarrolds, 1933), p. 9.

² Dodd, p. 196.

Shelleys and Byron and enter the company of Fanny Godwin, who is about to commit suicide; we then turn from her to hear from Harriet Westbrook, whose own suicide followed a couple of months later. However, a technique that was perhaps undertaken in the interests of vividness and verisimilitude succeeds only in rendering the novel diffuse, and with little narrative drive.

It was noted by one of Dodd's reviewers that 'in the ordinary progress of the narrative she quotes so freely from journals, letters, reminiscences and biographies of Shelley that the novel takes on something of the timorous pedantry of a PhD thesis.'³ This is not an unfair assessment. Dodd notes that '*According* to an entry in Godwin's diary, Mary returned to Skinner Street on the 30th March 1814 and it was *probably* in May that Shelley saw her again.'⁴ Similarly, when describing Harriet and Percy's deteriorating relations, she hedges 'The interview *seems* to have exhausted Shelley and it made Harriet think deeply. Harriet *seems* to have temporised.'⁵ Here we see that Dodd's writing style is too akin to that of a careful historian to take flight as fiction. Thus, in a novel that bears more similarity to the earlier biographies than to any fictive text, it is unsurprising that the figure of Mary Shelley in *Eagle-Feather* should differ little from the portraits of her found in those. Dodd's final verdict rings familiarly:

She survived [Percy] for thirty years, into those dull and inglorious years of middle age. She lived to see her son grow up into a correct though commonplace gentleman; she had to struggle with a genteel penurious poverty, she wrote commonplace books, but Mary Shelley bore a great and noble part in life for her tender sympathy and companionship with the immortal Shelley⁶.

This passage could have been written by any of the nineteenth-century chroniclers: Mary Shelley is the suitable helpmeet for a man of genius. However it is interesting to note that where Helen Moore and Florence Marshall acknowledged Mary Shelley's creative abilities, in Dodd's account she has become the producer of 'commonplace books'.

³ William Maxwell, review of *Eagle-Feather*, *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 June 1933, p. 10.

⁴ Dodd, p. 195 (my emphasis).

⁵ Dodd, p. 203 (my emphasis).

⁶ Dodd, p. 309-10.

It is possible to attribute this shift in perception to *Ariel* which had been published around ten years before Dodd's work and whose vivid prose had made an immediate impact. Although a portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley, its depiction of Mary Shelley was no less influential. Twinned with the 'aërial', dreamy, feminised poet, Mary was counterpointed as the earth-bound, practical housewife. The early comparisons between Harriet and Mary to be found in the first biographies are condensed into Maurois' thumb-nail sketches: Harriet was 'coquettish, frivolous, versed in the tricks and wiles of woman', whereas Mary 'of the nut-brown eyes, was slim and true as a Toledo blade. Brought up by the author of *Political Justice*, her mind appeared free from all feminine superstition.'⁷ As the narrative of *Ariel* progresses, these straightforward qualities gradually become less evidence of Mary's honest nature, and more indicators of her irredeemable lack of poetry. Edward Trelawny's assessment of her as 'miserable' and 'yearning for society' finds expression in Maurois' portrait of the almost permanently grieving woman who 'saw everything through a mist of tears.'⁸ Although she is initially counterpointed with Harriet, Mary is mainly contrasted with Percy: his disregard for the opinions of his peers finds conflict with her status 'as an unmarried wife' who 'suffered from her social ostracism, and thought that if they went abroad, where their story would be unknown, she would have more chance of making friends.'⁹ Later we find her fretting over the presence of Claire's child by Byron: 'The old accusations of promiscuity again reared their heads and Mary's prudishness suffered from it.'¹⁰

Thus, via Maurois, the opinions of Trelawny filter through to the twentieth century, where Mary Shelley appears in Dodd's novel as the tragic yet ultimately mediocre figure whose only true achievement was her marriage. Dodd's image of Percy Bysshe Shelley is also seemingly inherited from Maurois. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the latter describes him: 'This boy, who was exceptionally beautiful, with brilliant blue eyes, dark curling hair, and a delicate complexion, displayed a sensitiveness of conscience most unusual in one of his class[...]'.¹¹ In Dodd's hands this becomes: 'He was a strange, beautiful boy, with a curious unlikeness to his fellow-mortals, a being hardly of this earth, slight and fragile in

⁷ Maurois, p.137.

⁸ Maurois, p. 170.

⁹ Maurois, p. 178.

¹⁰ Maurois, p.209.

¹¹ Maurois, p. 6.

figure, with a complexion of “the purest red and white”.¹² Dodd inherits not only the image of Percy, but the terms in which he is described. But Maurois gives free rein to his powers of description (and consequently to his mythologisation of the poet) in passages such as the following:

His love of books, his contempt for games, his long hair floating in the wind, his collar opened on a girlish throat, everything about him scandalized those self-charged to maintain in the little world of Eton the brutal spirit of which it was so proud.

But Shelley, from his first day there, having decided that fagging was an outrage to human dignity, had refused obedience to the orders of his fag-master.¹³

Whereas, in Dodd’s prose this becomes, somewhat bathetically: ‘At Eton he was known as “mad Shelley.” Here he was dogged in his refusal to play games, and he fought fiercely against the fagging system.’¹⁴ It is sometimes difficult to remember that Maurois was writing a biography and Dodd a novel.

In Dodd’s favour it must be noted that although she inherits some of Maurois’ stereotypes, she also manages to escape the image created by Maurois of Mary Shelley as a cold and uncreative intellectual. Maurois ignores all of her creative output, including *Frankenstein* itself, an oversight noted by his reviewers at the time.¹⁵ But because of Dodd’s supplementation of the central story of Percy with her own portraits of many of the other figures of the time, many of whom are women, Dodd’s tone is simply less chauvinistic. Moreover, although the narrative can be disjointed, and occasionally incoherent, her efforts to include every incident of note means the creation of *Frankenstein* once again shares the stage with Byron and Shelley’s creations at Diodati, even if only in the form of a clumsy (and inaccurate) paraphrase of Mary Shelley’s 1831 introduction: ‘All night she thought about corpses, and her snatches of sleep were disturbed by fearful dreams of monstrous corpses coming to life and grinning at her.’¹⁶ So where we see Maurois’ use of fictive techniques produces a corresponding tendency to caricature in the portraits of his ‘biography’,

¹² Dodd, p. 91.

¹³ Maurois, p. 6.

¹⁴ Dodd, p. 93.

¹⁵ See review in *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 June 1923, p. 437.

¹⁶ Dodd, p. 235. Of course, this could also be an example of the influence of the film of *Frankenstein*, which had been released two years earlier.

Dodd's tendency towards more biographical techniques in her 'novel' produces, if not rounded and convincing characters, a somewhat fuller image of Mary Shelley than managed by Maurois. The comparison of these two texts illustrates the blurring of generic boundaries that was taking place at this time: the increasing use of fictivity in supposedly factual texts, and the corresponding intrusion of history into fictional texts. The boundaries, as shall become clear, will only become more porous over the next few decades.

The main aspects of her character presented by Maurois and Dodd (who had followed Trelawny and Hogg before them) were to be seen continuing in various forms over the next few years. The next two novels in which Mary Shelley appears, are both fictional biographies of peripheral figures of the Shelley circle. In the first, Rupert Hughes' portrait of John Howard Payne *The Man Without a Home* (1935), Payne is unrequitedly in love with Mary, while in J.H. Pollock's *The Moth and the Star* (1937) the artist Amelia Curran, who painted the Shelleys in Rome in 1819, is seen to be quietly hankering after Percy. As would be expected these narratives produced two very different portraits of Mary Shelley. Although Hughes inevitably inherits many of his characters' main qualities from his biographical and fictional predecessors, because of the entirely new angle brought to bear on the material by his protagonist's point-of-view, Mary Shelley is seen through new (albeit fictional) eyes. Hughes' novel owes much to *The Romance of Mary W. Shelley, John Howard Payne and Washington Irving* published in 1907 by the Boston Bibliophile Society, which, through their letters, documents the odd love-triangle formed between the three writers in Mary Shelley's widowhood.¹⁷ In the novel, Payne suffers from what can only be described as unrequited idolatry of Mary Shelley, and because of this she is no longer the besotted housewife tagging along with a genius, but herself the object of adoration, and this automatically renders her a glamorous, independent figure who is entirely idealised by the hapless Payne. In this way it anticipates, by several decades, a much more recent image of Shelley.

It does this in more ways than one. Payne's idealisation of her is linked to a wider theme expressed throughout the novel which recognises how the narrative of

¹⁷ Payne was in love with Mary, but she was more interested in his friend, the writer, Washington Irving. Payne selflessly attempted to initiate a romance between the two, but failed due to Irving's lack of interest.

Mary Shelley's life itself contains fictive elements. The novel also notes the corresponding tendency by those who only knew her distantly to actively participate in fictionalising that narrative further. Payne is an actor/dramatist whose 'imagination followed Mary through scenes, not the least like reality, but very dramatic to him. She was becoming a mythical figure in a play.'¹⁸ and for whom 'the theatre was life, and life but a series of situations in a bungled drama.'¹⁹ He even suggests that her life would make a great play to a colleague, whose response is immediate and dismissive:

'My boy, your bump of the ridiculous is a dimple. Your lack of it will be your ruin yet. That girl's story put in a play would be laughed off the stage. [...] She's gone through too much. When tragedy, or bravery, is piled on too thick it turns to farce.[...] The Godwin girl is impossible. She's unbelievable. She – man, she's unconvincing! And that's the worst of dramatic sins. At a time when she ought to be hardly out of dolls she is carrying on a love-affair in a graveyard with the craziest of all crazy poets.'²⁰

Unfortunately Payne is unable to realise this, which means that he casts not only the people around him, but also his own life, in the terms of the theatre which results in his eventual imprisonment for debt. But although Payne's inability to separate art and reality means he ends his days alone and far from home, it also means he has some apposite observations to make about the questionable boundary between art and life. He reflects to Mary Shelley at one point, 'Aren't we just characters in a book? You write characters in plays. I write characters in novels. But Somebody Else writes us – and to fit another plot.'²¹ In his day Rupert Hughes was a popular and bestselling novelist, so it is unlikely that this fictional statement is evidence of a sudden eruption of post-modern self-reflexivity before its time.²² It is less a questioning of then-current artistic complacencies but rather one of the tools with which Hughes delineates Payne's deluded relationship with the world around him, and of which Mary Shelley's life becomes the perfect expression.

¹⁸ Rupert Hughes, *The Man Without a Home* (New York: Harper, 1935), p. 88.

¹⁹ Hughes, p. 86.

²⁰ Hughes, p. 113.

²¹ Hughes, p. 232.

²² See Charles Higham, *Howard Hughes: The Secret Life* (New York: Putnam, 1993). Rupert Hughes was the reclusive film-director's uncle.

The narrative of Mary Godwin/Shelley's life is alternated with that of Payne's so that parallels between them can be detected: as we have seen the fantastic nature of the events of her life feed Payne's confusion of art and reality, but another parallel that Hughes clearly attempts to draw is between the peripatetic nature of all their lives, and its relation in Payne's case to the metaphor of home and homelessness. Hughes uses this metaphor to express the central irony of Payne's life. Payne travelled extensively in his career, crossing the Atlantic several times, and moving around Europe, ending his days as American consul in Turkey, but he is most famous for writing the song 'Home Sweet Home'. So Payne feels he has found kindred spirits when he hears that the Shelleys have run out of money during their travels round Europe in 1814. He assumes "'They've gone home?'"', but his interlocutor puts him right: "'Home? They don't know the word. They've set out to walk all the way to Switzerland.'²³

Accordingly, Mary Shelley's authorship of *Frankenstein* is cast in the same terms as Payne's writing of 'Home Sweet Home': they both achieve unsought fame and popularity. The popularity of Payne's song is illustrated during their first meeting, Mary unconsciously hums it without knowing its author is standing opposite her. When she finds this out she is duly astonished: 'Why, the song is sweeping the world. Everybody in Italy is singing it. Some people from London brought the music with them. They said it was the rage there.'²⁴ Thus, *Frankenstein* becomes Mary Shelley's own 'Home Sweet Home'; written 'on a bet for a lark', it unwittingly becomes a huge success (Hughes is telegraphing into the future here): 'It far out-sold all of Shelley's works put together – and will live as long. The hero's name became a common noun.'²⁵ Moreover, in the same way that 'Home Sweet Home' has a great irony at the heart of its composition – that its composer is almost permanently homeless – so too does *Frankenstein*: '[Payne] bought the three volumes and read them with a new amazement at such wormwood from so sweet a source. The novel fairly made his flesh crawl, and it stunned him that so gentle and gracious a creature could have conceived that story'.²⁶ The apparent paradox of a woman creating a story about a monster is an idea at the heart of more recent fiction produced about Mary Shelley, but in Hughes' novel it figures as nothing more than an odd anomaly, and

²³ Hughes, pp. 87-88.

²⁴ Hughes, p. 176.

²⁵ Hughes, p. 118.

²⁶ Hughes, p. 120.

does not play a large part in the construction of her character. The unusual element here in the perception of *Frankenstein* is that both its success and importance are taken for granted, instead of either being the subject of defensive battling, or being ignored or belittled, as has been the case previously.

Thus the Shelleys are shaped in this fiction by the central metaphors that shape another's life. We see them through Payne's eyes his mythologising view of them in the context of *The Man Without a Home* becomes an example of how they were mythologised generally. Hughes shows how what we know of the Shelleys and the other historical figures around them is shaped by gossip and hearsay, and that it is this, rather than a set of facts, that has been passed on to us. Throughout the novel whenever a character tells of the latest exploits of the Shelleys, or even when the third-person narrator is taking up their story, the reader is reminded that what we are hearing was also material for the gossip-mongers of the day (and therefore may, or may not, be true): 'The tickled gossips whispered that his wife Harriet and his mistress Mary were both going to have babies. Those poets were dangerous playmates!'²⁷ One character tries to convince Payne of the pleasures of gossip, but Payne won't have it:

'It's a lie – a mess of dirty gossip. I won't listen to gossip.'

'No? Then you'll miss the best part of life.'

'It's never true.'

'I've usually found it a little better than the truth – not because the gossips want to spare anybody, but because they never know all the ugly facts.'²⁸

Thus the image of Mary Shelley we receive from this text is one that, to a certain extent, proclaims its own factitiousness.

As is the case with Dodd's novel, and indeed with almost any fictional biography, *The Man Without a Home* is a patchwork of fictionalised dialogue, internal monologue, inserted quotation from biographical sources, and 'well-known facts' about its subjects. Thus when Percy describes Harriet to Mary, it is in the form of a quotation from Thomas Love Peacock's *Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley*: "Harriet is a noble animal[...] but everyone who knows me must know that the partner of my

²⁷ Hughes, p. 100.

²⁸ Hughes, p. 85.

life should be one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy. Harriet can do neither.”²⁹ And when Mary Godwin first meets Percy, Hughes draws on her intellectual background as the basis for her characterisation:

She was of a scholarly trend of mind and her father had schooled her to heavy thought and the reading of the most learned books. She did not think of herself as beautiful and it could not occur to her that she had set the inflammable poet on fire as if she had struck him with a torch. More slowly she caught fire from him and was helpless in the unsuspected passions he kindled in her flesh, more used to embracing ponderous books than a lover’s body.³⁰

Here is the familiar contrast established between intellectualism and sensuality that can be found in *Ariel*, that will continue on through later fictions, and is used in this case to emphasise Mary Godwin’s lack of experience. The difference between Hughes’ portrait and Maurois’ however, is that where for the earlier writer Mary’s intellectual gifts are an illustration of her coldness and rationality and her prosaic connection to material reality, for Hughes they are, on the contrary, an obstacle to her practicality. Hughes, unlike Maurois, sets up an opposition between mind and body, in which Mary, all mind, wrestles with the material world around her: ‘One day [Percy] came to find her stitching at garments for his child-to-be and stabbing her fingers with the needle as she leaned sidewise to pore over a copy of Plato she was trying to read in the original.’³¹ This is quite different from the petty housewife in *Ariel*. Although both Hughes and Maurois share a light and irreverent tone towards their subjects (which can clearly be seen in the comical portrait of Mary above), Hughes does not have the dismissive contempt to be found in Maurois’ attitude to her. For example, in contrast to Maurois’ adoption of Trelawny’s belief that Mary was ultimately a ‘conventional slave’, the narrator of *The Man Without a Home* reflects,

Nice young ladies, and young women not so nice, did not recline in graveyards with young men – at least not in the broad daylight. Other girls of that day would have leapt to their feet with a deal of pretended panic, and run away, hoping to be pursued to more discreet

²⁹ Hughes, pp. 69-70. *Peacock’s Memoirs*, p. 48.

³⁰ Hughes, pp. 62-3.

³¹ Hughes, p. 101.

seclusion. But Mary sat still and listened with gentle wisdom to Shelley's voluble outpourings.³²

In this passage, Mary is both unconventional and fearless. It could be argued that this is an incident taken from her early life, and that if she became at all conventional it was later, after Percy's death. But because this novel is about her relationship with John Howard Payne, which occurred at just this time of her life, Hughes pays closer attention than previous, more Shelleyan biographers and fictionalisers, to Mary Shelley's later life.

If Payne remains for most of the novel Mary Shelley's lover from afar, his feelings are no less ardent when he finally meets her and forges a friendship with her. And she is seen accordingly in the light of Payne's starstruck love: 'The black of the crêpe gave the gardenia whiteness of her skin an unearthly glamour. Her throat was beautiful with the pathos that finds its expression there. Her mouth, so full and passionate when she thought of love, was taut and pale with the struggle against the cruelty of death.'³³ Later, when Payne is thoroughly smitten with her, we find that, in direct contrast to the mealy-mouthed prude to be found in *Ariel*: '[Payne] saw in her the peace, the depth, the self-knowing honesty and fearless courage that had led her not so much to defy the world as to ignore it'.³⁴ Thus her later years, ignored by Maurois, and dismissed by Dodd as the years which produced nothing but mediocrity, become filled out by Hughes and defined in contrast to those previous images of Mary Shelley as nothing much more than a handmaiden to genius. Having said that, Payne's love produces jealousy centring on the dead poet Percy, and we find that 'It humbled and tortured Payne to hear Mary speak forever of Shelley, yet he revered her for her loyalty. The usual year-gone widow tried to forget and find a substitute for her husband. But Mary Shelley's mate was increasingly alive, immortal. Payne had for a rival, not the ghost of a human man, but an angel.'³⁵ We find here a familiar construction of the couple that can be traced back to the nineteenth-century biographies. But despite this, the overall light in which she is cast in this text – the light of unrequited love – inevitably renders her one of its central figures, and one of great power and attraction.

³² Hughes, p. 67.

³³ Hughes, pp. 169-70.

³⁴ Hughes, p. 184.

³⁵ Hughes, p. 202.

From the sinister light in which Mary Shelley is cast in J.H. Pollock's *The Moth and the Star* (1937), one might assume that *Frankenstein* has a role to play in the construction of her persona here, but the novel is not even named. The sinister air arises partly from her juxtaposition with the other women in the novel and also from her relationship with Percy. We are back with the familiar characters from Maurois, and *The Moth and the Star* shows *Ariel's* influence. Like *The Man Without a Home*, this is a text which focuses on one of the peripheral characters in the Shelley story: Amelia Curran, the artist and daughter of Irish lawyer, John Curran. The central premise of the story is Amelia's unrequited love for Percy Shelley, whom she first meets on his trip to Dublin with Harriet (then his wife) in 1812. The stage is set for their meeting through the characterisation of Amelia as an artist suffering under the hand of a tyrannical, vulgar father. She has been advised by a widower, Mr Hudson (who is himself half in love with her) that she needs to get away: 'Italy – say in the company of other artists, not merely painters: writers, sculptors, poets: under the southern sun, surrounded by the beauties of antiquity, and above all, your own mistress – in a word, free.'³⁶ When Hudson leaves for Paris, Amelia is bereft and hankers for some nameless fulfilment. Enter Percy Bysshe Shelley, the idea of whom fills Amelia with hope, so that when he arrives 'her entire spirit glowed, thrilled, and expanded under the spell'. His physical appearance is described in familiar terms as 'the beautiful, ethereal boy, almost luminous in the sunshafts which fell between the tree-boles'.³⁷ Unfortunately Amelia has not been informed of the existence of Harriet, Percy's first wife, and so when she appears, 'passively close upon his heels [...] A blackness came before Amelia's eyes, and she swayed slightly. A miserable revulsion swept over her.'³⁸ This sets the tone for Amelia and Percy's relationship as it is depicted over the course of the novel: he unwittingly feeds Amelia's infatuation, only to disappoint her at every turn. However, despite her initial disappointment she finds herself warming to the child-like Harriet:

Her perennial difficulties with her little bonnet which fitted badly, and was always falling back in consequence; her timidity at a certainly somewhat

³⁶ J.H. Pollock, *The Moth and the Star* (Dublin: Talbot, 1937), p. 27.

³⁷ Pollock, p. 90.

³⁸ Pollock, p. 90.

unusual company, in what, to her London-bred mind, appeared a foreign country; her pathetic anxiety to please; but above all, her childish preoccupation with her husband [...] all inclined to awaken in the elder girl a deep, maternal regard.³⁹

Amelia's relation to Harriet establishes two narrative strategies that will affect the reader's perception of Mary Shelley later in the novel: the device (deployed by Maurois in *Ariel*) of contrasting Harriet and Mary as a method of characterisation, and the rhetoric of motherhood versus artistic creativity which is expressed through the characters of both Amelia and Mary. If Harriet is a child, then when Amelia first meets Mary – resting from the heat in the Coliseum in Rome – the poet's second wife is Harriet's opposite: a mother where Harriet is child-like, responsible and careworn where Harriet was cared for and carefree. Amelia's first sight of Mary at the Coliseum is of a figure at the bottom of some steps, 'toiling painfully and slowly upwards'.⁴⁰ The note of struggle in this description is developed over the rest of the text, so that Mary Shelley becomes a figure beleaguered by circumstance (the heat of the Coliseum, the steepness of the steps) and by the irresponsibility of her husband (who, in this first appearance, has wandered off). When Amelia laments her own unmarried, childless state, Mary responds "Compensations exist in every condition of life: your responsibilities are limited and defined."⁴¹ At their parting 'The woman with the pale oval features and the cold grey eyes bowed',⁴² a description confirmed at their next meeting when Amelia observes the woman's 'somewhat chilly grey eyes'.⁴³ Thus, Pollock retains the emotionally ungenerous Mary Shelley to be found in *Ariel*.

Their next accidental meeting also takes place in the Coliseum, when Amelia encounters William, who has lost his ball. When Amelia appears concerned that there is no one to look after him he explains "mother's with me, but she dhrawing pichures [*sic*], and I got tired watching her, and ran away."⁴⁴ When she suggests they find her, he protests, "I don't want to go [...] I want to sthay here with you: I

³⁹ Pollock, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Pollock, p. 190.

⁴¹ Pollock, p. 192.

⁴² Pollock, pp. 193-4.

⁴³ Pollock, p. 198.

⁴⁴ Pollock, p. 196. The spelling is Pollock's rendering of a child's lisp.

like you.”⁴⁵ Thus Pollock simultaneously establishes Amelia’s mothering abilities and casts doubt on Mary Shelley’s. This is followed by a scene in which the two women (William having been persuaded to take Amelia to his mother), prompted by Mary’s painting, discuss their differing approaches to art. Later, walking home (after William has again displayed his preference for Amelia by taking her hand rather than his mother’s) Amelia is overtaken by maternal feelings:

“I envy you your child,” suddenly exclaimed Amelia, and then checked herself, a warm colour suffusing her temple and throat.

“Yes; the artist’s desire to create some adequate object has always been strong within me: it is better satisfied by my son than by anything else I have ever undertaken.”

“Perhaps art is only a substitute for actual life, after all,” said Amelia, “if we lived vividly, rapidly enough, we might not attach so much importance to it.”

“That is hardly accurate, I think; the lives of many creative artists are vivid enough, God knows, apart from the qualities of their work.” Her companion’s face clouded, and lost some of its customary resolution as she spoke.⁴⁶

Although *Frankenstein* is not referred to by name at any point in this novel, and although Mary may be seen here, superficially, to be talking about her painterly rather than her writerly gifts, the fact that she could also be talking about her most famous literary production would not escape the notice of a reader in 1937. The huge success of James Whale’s 1931 film of *Frankenstein* and its follow-up, the equally popular *The Bride of Frankenstein* of 1935, meant that the image of Boris Karloff’s lumbering, bolt-necked creation would by now have been embedded in the popular imagination. If Maurois had managed to ruffle the feathers of only a few critics by failing to mention Mary Shelley’s most famous work, then the impact of Whale’s film would have made it nearly impossible for an author to have discussed Mary Shelley without conjuring an image of her creation (whether he mentioned it or not). Thus, in the above exchange the reader is invited to believe that Mary Shelley found the creation of her children far more satisfying than her creation of *Frankenstein*, and any

⁴⁵ Pollock, p. 197.

⁴⁶ Pollock, p. 200.

problematic connotations to be found in the intertextual presence of this novel are thereby dismissed.

Similarly, in episodes which appear throughout the novel in which Amelia nurses another character in the last stages of an illness – her father, William (whose affection for her has already been noted), and Keats, who died of consumption in Rome in 1821 – it is hinted that Amelia Curran’s own ‘desire to create some adequate object’ is simply a sublimation of her maternal instinct. Despite Mary Shelley’s own admission that her motherhood has given her greater satisfaction than her artistic endeavours, we have already had a hint from William himself that she is unsatisfactory and Amelia is much preferred. When he is dying Mary is so distraught that she proves herself an inadequate mother, and Amelia replaces her at William’s bed-side. And it seems to be this that almost satisfies that unnamed longing which dogged her when she had first met Shelley:

Tranquility, a strange inexplicable tranquility visited Amelia; deep in her subconscious mind dwelt a secret comfort that it was she who had co-operated with Shelley in nursing his child. [...] Her unfulfilled maternity was temporarily appeased, while the idealised romanticism of her regard for Shelley had come to be justified by the service she had rendered. It was then, for this end that she had first met with Dionysus [Shelley] upon the balcony, in Sackville Street.⁴⁷

Thus Amelia Curran’s sublimated maternal instinct that finds imperfect expression in painting is seen to find its true home in the service of artists greater than herself. This is confirmed when Joseph Severn, Keats’ friend, observes, “‘In all your work I sense a certain element of indecision, timidity, dare I hint at fear?’” and to which Amelia responds “‘You are a man, Mr. Severn, and audacity is the privilege of your sex. I am a woman, and cannot stand alone: I need a stronger nature than my own beside me, to lead the way: the power of initiative is not mine.’”⁴⁸

It is perhaps this sentiment that is the key to understanding the portrait of Mary Shelley that the reader receives from this text. Although I have pointed out that in the novel she finds motherhood more satisfying than artistic creation, her apparent failure at an activity that is presented through the character of Amelia as being a

⁴⁷ Pollock, p. 236.

⁴⁸ Pollock, p. 273.

natural instinct establishes her as an ‘unnatural’ woman. Her ‘cold eyes’, her intellectualism (expressed in philosophical exchanges with Amelia), coupled with the contrast with the carefree and, now pitifully dead, Harriet, all serve to cast Mary Shelley in an unfavourable light. The key to her relationship with Percy and thus the explanation of her character for the reader is revealed in her final meeting with Amelia Curran. She has written to Amelia in 1821 (before Percy’s death) requesting the portrait Amelia had painted of him. Amelia feels her last connection with Percy lies in that painting and so quietly ignores the importunate letter. After Percy dies, Mary arrives to claim her due from Amelia in a scene in which the latter is a positively sinister presence. The narrator describes Amelia gazing at the painting of Percy, oblivious to her surroundings, ‘inattentive to the gentle entrance of a feminine being who noiselessly crossed the studio floor to stand close behind the owner. The arrival was uniformly in black: a long mantilla depended from her head behind, while a veil of similar material in front completely concealed her features’.⁴⁹ Amelia feels that she has been put at a disadvantage and that ‘An impossible atmosphere had been created, almost deliberately, it appeared to her. [...] She remained silent, leaving the initiative to Mary, whose bearing and manner strongly suggested that she was keenly alive to her superior vantage ground in any conflict of words.’⁵⁰ Here Mary Shelley is imposing and manipulative, and in her ability to take the initiative, she is also masculine (in Amelia’s view at any rate). During this meeting we find Amelia suffering under ‘that remorseless analytical stare’, and when Mary asks Amelia to return the portrait, we find Mary’s words ‘falling like drops of ice-water upon Amelia’s shivering soul.’⁵¹ When Mary gives a short account of her relationship with Percy in order to make it clear to Amelia that she was simply one in a long line of besotted admirers, she reveals that Harriet’s “[...]ghost has lain down between us: yes, Miss Curran, in the most intimate and sacred relations she has been there: waking, and sleeping, he has breathed her name – and not mine.”⁵² It is this revelation that finally defines Mary Shelley in Pollock’s *The Moth and the Star*: she is defined against Harriet, the wronged innocent, the only woman truly loved by Percy, and becomes by implication, guilty. She shares partial guilt for the deaths of

⁴⁹ Pollock, p. 302.

⁵⁰ Pollock, p. 304.

⁵¹ Pollock, p. 304.

⁵² Pollock, p. 306. This was borne out earlier in the novel when an apparition of Percy cries out “‘Speak Harriet, speak to me – say that you forgive me, and that you love me – as I love you still, as I know now I shall never love another woman!’” (Pollock, p. 257).

Harriet and of William. She has been depicted throughout the novel as 'detached, controlled, impersonal', as neither fully a woman nor a mother.⁵³ Even though she has made these revelations to Amelia, which the reader is to assume will have cost her dearly in emotion, Mary Shelley is perceived by Amelia as impervious and unyielding: 'there was no shadow of a promise of relenting Mary Shelley's complete self-possession: it was useless to resist: she bowed weakly, in assent.'⁵⁴

The almost inhuman figure of Mary Shelley created by Pollock in this novel is an expression, in embryo, of a perception that can be seen to develop in later fictions, but in those more explicitly tied to her creation of *Frankenstein*. The perception of Mary Shelley as an uncanny figure, a woman who creates monsters, whose own life contained so much tragic death, and yet who appeared to those around her to be so emotionally detached, is to feed her increasing gothicisation in later fictions. Her status as Percy Shelley's wife fades into the background in favour of her status as creator of one of the most famous monster-icons. However, in the next two novels to be discussed, representations of her life fall into the rather different genre of romantic fiction. Elements of this can also be seen in *The Moth and the Star*, in the relationship between Percy and Amelia, where at times they fall into the archetypal figures of romantic hero and heroine. But it is Mary and Percy who are framed in these terms at the beginning of the 1960s, when F. W. Kenyon's *The Golden Years* (1960) and Guy Bolton's *The Olympians* (1961) appeared.

There are several factors that led to the increasing romanticisation of the Shelleys' lives in fiction. The romantic nature of their biographical narratives alone make their lives ripe for fictional treatment. But added to this are developments in genre fiction that took place over the 30 year period from the 1930s to the 1960s that make the Shelleys' presence in romantic fiction seem almost overdetermined. To begin with, popular historical fiction came to overlap with the romance genre as the twentieth century progressed. Helen Hughes, in her study of the genre, *The Historical Romance* (1993), traces this development: 'After the early 1930s [...] the swashbuckling yarn seems to have lost its appeal; a few writers [...] continued to write the same kind of book and find a market until the 1950s, but their work was beginning to seem decidedly old-fashioned. After this decade, historical romance became predominantly

⁵³ Pollock, p. 307.

⁵⁴ Pollock, p. 307.

a woman's genre.'⁵⁵ The author she credits with having had the greatest contribution to this change is the writer of Regency romances, Georgette Heyer. So not only does the narrative emphasis come to rest on the love-story, but the archetypal setting for historical romances becomes the precise period in which Mary and Percy were carrying out their own romance. Hughes also points out that despite the increased focus on the love-interest of the narrative, the nature of the earlier historical romances involving '[a]bductions, escapes, rescues, disguises and unknown identities', actually changed little in their transmogrification into stories for women. Later historical romances 'were so similar in plot and characterization to the earlier adventure stories that a continuous line of development could be traced from the beginning of the century to the 1980s.'⁵⁶

Just as Hughes points to the historical romance becoming more 'romantic' around the 1930s, it is in this decade that Mills & Boon, initially a general publisher, began to concentrate on the burgeoning area of romance publication, and it was around this time that narrative conventions began to emerge that would become entrenched practice over the next few decades. These conventions are documented and discussed by Joseph McAleer in *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills & Boon* (1999), and can be clearly seen in varying forms in the novels about the Shelleys produced in the early 1960s. Although the fictions in which the Shelleys appear around this time are more sexually explicit than those which would have been approved by Mills & Boon, their progressiveness is limited to sexuality. As I shall show, many of the narrative and character conventions that were requirements of this imprint were in fact to be found in almost every example of the genre. The novels began to fall into some recognisable patterns: 'The heroine is a virgin, aged 18-20, somewhat clever, and almost always an orphan, which lent sympathy [...] The hero is significantly older, aged 30-40, enigmatic, and rough-edged[...] There is always a happy ending. The couple marry or, if already husband and wife, settle their differences and make a better start.'⁵⁷ Taken with the inevitable stricture, 'Pre- and extra-marital affairs were naturally discouraged',⁵⁸ it becomes immediately apparent that casting the Shelleys' lives in these terms presented various obstacles, but by the

⁵⁵ Helen Hughes, *The Historical Romance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 3. To avoid confusion with Rupert Hughes, further references to this text will be made using Helen Hughes' full name.

⁵⁶ Helen Hughes, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Joseph McAleer, *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills & Boon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 150-151.

⁵⁸ McAleer, p. 156.

time Kenyon and Bolton were writing, at the tail-end of the 1950s, there had been several developments in the conventions of romance-writing, most notably brought on by the war. If, in the 30s, the heroine was required to be 'somewhat clever', twenty years later, her independence had increased so that she had become a 'career girl', and one who was, moreover 'asserting her independence [...] by supporting her parents or siblings.'⁵⁹ In this way, readers could more readily identify with the heroine. Where the end goal was still 'companionate marriage, motherhood, and financial security',⁶⁰ it was noted by one of Mills & Boon's most successful writers that 'lately heroes were clever and aggressive, but not rich: "Brains now take precedence over wealth"'.⁶¹

Thus the field of popular fiction becomes more amenable to the various circumstances surrounding the love-lives of the Shelleys. We can see some of the conventions at work in F.W.Kenyon's *The Golden Years* which is explicitly framed as romantic in the subtitle, *The Life and Loves of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, and its consequent division into three parts entitled 'Harriet', 'Mary', and 'Jane'. It is the relationship between Percy and Harriet that most easily falls into the conventions demanded of the hero and heroine. McAleer observes that there is 'A common scene, usually at the beginning of the novel,' in which 'the heroine senses an unmistakable attraction to the hero. "Electricity" was often in the air.'⁶² Accordingly we find in *The Golden Years*, 'Harriet looked up at him [Percy] in tremulous amazement. His smile was the most charming and guileless she had ever seen. A final sob died in her throat. [...] Lost entirely in the compelling gaze of those large blue eyes, she knew that whatever he might ask of her she would do at once, and gladly.'⁶³ Following this scene, usually came 'the so-called "punishing kiss", the first passionate kiss between hero and heroine that readers anxiously awaited.'⁶⁴ Obliging, we find this scene a few pages later in Kenyon's novel:

'Unbutton the front of your dress and slip it off your shoulders,' he commanded. 'I want to see for myself.'
'What do you want to see for yourself?' she stammered.

⁵⁹ McAleer, p. 198.

⁶⁰ McAleer, p. 158.

⁶¹ McAleer, p. 199.

⁶² McAleer, p. 154.

⁶³ F.W. Kenyon, *The Golden Years: The Life and Loves of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p. 18.

⁶⁴ McAleer, p. 155.

‘How delightfully you blush!’ he laughed. ‘Come, do as I say!’

‘Oh, Bysshe, what a thing to ask of me!’

‘Idiot!’ And reaching out as she stood hesitantly before him he unbuttoned her dress and dragged at it until her white and rounded shoulders gleamed in the morning sun. ‘So I did hurt you last night.’

‘Dreadfully,’ she exaggerated.

He stroked the bare shoulders gently. ‘I can see several bruises. What a brute I was.’ He took her contritely in his arms. ‘Forgive me, Harriet, please.’

‘Oh, gladly, gladly!’

Shelley kissed her shoulders and her neck, and holding her away from him he looked at her pleadingly.⁶⁵

Although this is not strictly speaking a ‘punishing kiss’, in this scene Percy certainly falls into the mould of ‘the Alphaman’ delineated by McAleer, and the ‘brute hero’ identified by Hughes, with Harriet as the swooning heroine. Percy’s atheism has already been extensively treated by Kenyon, thus establishing him as ‘clever’, and although heroes were not required to be rich by the time we enter the 1950s, and Percy certainly wasn’t, his aristocratic background nevertheless gives great potential financial security, as well as the higher social status demanded of the hero in relation to the heroine.

Later in the novel, when Percy meets Mary, she too is clearly of a lower social status than him, as well as being both ‘somewhat clever’ (in keeping with romantic conventions of the time) and also having a job (thus trumping Harriet) - Percy first meets her working in her father’s bookshop. However, Mary’s much vaunted intellectuality, which has by now become established in prose fiction, is in fact something of an obstacle to the kind of romantic relationship depicted between Percy and Harriet. Although he has been positively Heathcliffian in his relations with Harriet, we find that Mary produces rather different behaviour: ‘Shelley followed the girl into the shop and vaulting on to the counter sat there with his knees clasped in his arms[...] He thought she looked older in the candlelight, while she for her part thought he looked younger, the more so because of his boyish attitude.’⁶⁶ Thus, Mary is presented in direct contrast to Harriet’s submissiveness, and her criticism of Percy’s work (which occurs in the dialogue of this scene) renders her clearly an intellectual

⁶⁵ Kenyon, p. 25.

⁶⁶ Kenyon, pp. 147-8.

match for him. In her current state, Mary does not appear to fit easily into the role of romantic heroine, nor he of overpowering romantic hero. This is not to say, however, that she has no ambitions in this regard, on the contrary, once her intellectual credentials have been established, it is safe for Mary to wish for an added dimension to their relationship:

‘I can see nothing but a blinding light,’ Shelley whispered. ‘A light that clothes you as never a woman was clothed before.’

Mary felt a little shiver of delight run down her back. Her father and his friends, even though she had been brought up on equal terms with them, still called her either a child or a girl. To be called a woman now, especially in that all-embracing tone, pleased her as never before.

‘A light of purest intellect,’ he added dreamily.

Her delight fading, Mary smiled wryly. Shelley was seeing her as an adult rather than as a woman, was appreciating her solely for her mental powers. I have a body as well as a brain, she wanted to tell him, but saw that so bold a statement might easily frighten him away.⁶⁷

Mary and Percy are here beginning to fall into a familiar counterpoint, first encountered nearly forty years before. When Percy tells her of his new poem, ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, she hints:

‘There are other sorts of beauty,’ [...]

‘Nonsense! I see beauty in your eyes, yes, but what else but *intellectual* beauty?’

‘Can that sort of beauty thrive for long without a little earthiness to support it?’ Mary asked.

‘Ah, you want an argument!’

Mary shook her head, despairing that even the broadest of hints would make him see her as she really was.⁶⁸

Thus they fall into the roles created for them by Maurois: she, earthbound and physical, whilst he is the ethereal poet, without common sense; both of these roles inflected by their additional roles as the protagonists of a romance. It is also an illustration of a common phenomenon that is not addressed by McAleer in his

⁶⁷ Kenyon, p. 153.

⁶⁸ Kenyon, p. 157.

ultimately optimistic study. Although the genre retains its readers by incorporating real social change in its plotlines that reflect the situations of its readers (such as working heroines), it is not so elastic that it can accommodate these changes at any other level than a superficial one. In her essay, 'Mills & Boon meets feminism', Ann Rosalind Jones observes that, 'Romance, in order to negotiate the actual contradictions between absorbing work and total dedication to a man, must contradict its own claims to realism. For the love conflict to occupy center stage, the job that gives the heroine glamor must always be temporary.'⁶⁹ And so, Mary gives up her job to run away with Percy, becoming the bearer of his children, and (eventually) his wife. Whatever obstacles that may have lain in the way of the Shelleys' characters being absorbed by the genre have been deftly evaded.

However, if they are pulled inevitably into the vortex of genre, rendering Mary Shelley a woman who can find true fulfilment only in her domestic role, then it is also the case that she pulls Percy with her. In contrast to Jones' view that romance tends to perpetuate gender inequalities, rather than challenging them, it has been argued that romance in fact draws the male characters inevitably into its purview, instead of leaving the female characters at the margins of a male-dominated fictional universe (as so many popular adventure romances did). Janet Batsleer points out in her essay 'Pulp in the Pink':

The noblemen of [Barbara] Cartland's stories are always diplomats, foreign secretaries, rulers of one kind or another, but their only sphere of action in these romances is determined by the world of women. This is true of historical romance more generally. Napoleon is not the director of armies and Empire, but the lover of Josephine. Tudor economics disappear in the face of Henry VIII's treatment of his wives.⁷⁰

Thus, whilst the increasing romanticisation of the Shelleys' lives can be seen as simply an illustration of their downward spiral into triviality and over-simplification, from another angle it becomes an example of how the focus of importance in Percy Shelley's life becomes his relationships and the women around him, rather than his

⁶⁹ Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Mills & Boon meets feminism' in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. by Jean Radford (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 195-218 (p. 207).

⁷⁰ Janet Batsleer, 'Pulp in the Pink' in *Reading Popular Narrative: A Sourcebook*, rev. ed., ed. by Bob Ashley, ([1989] London: Leicester University Press, 1997), pp. 217 – 222 (p. 220).

more public activities. Not only is he an actor in his own life, but we also see him acted upon: the love scenes quoted above are focalised from Mary's point of view because it is more important to the narrative that the reader knows what she is thinking rather than he. It was a particular device used by romantic writers, and was enshrined in 'Lubbock's Law' at Mills & Boon, from the critic Percy Lubbock's views on writing fiction: 'Telling the story from the heroine's point-of-view, Lubbock concluded, is "the readiest means of dramatically heightening a reported impression."'71 The first story Alan Boon recommended for publication in the 1930s, was entitled *Unconditional Surrender*: 'It was told from a man's point of view. It did not sell – and Boon learned a lesson he would never forget.'72 Thus, those writers who choose to fictionalise the life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, have found over the years that the most engaging narratives they can create centre around the women in his life. Of course this means that the figure of Percy Shelley as a poet suffers from the move into romance, his trivialisation confirming the worst fears of every critic who anticipated the descent of literary criticism into 'chatter about Shelley'. The true beneficiary of this development is the persona of Mary Shelley, which gradually begins to occupy a more centralised role in the retelling of his life: her point-of-view will make the story live.

The lesson learned by Alan Boon has also been absorbed, whether consciously or not, by Guy Bolton. In the blurb for his version of the story, *The Olympians* (1961), it is Percy Bysshe Shelley who is mentioned as the subject for this 'fine reconstruction', but the first page of the novel tells us that 'In St. Pancras churchyard the warm May sun shone down on grass studded with short-stem daisies. [...] On this day, too, it shone on fifteen-year old Mary Godwin sprawled on the grass beside the grave of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft.'73 So, where Kenyon occasionally focalised scenes from Mary Shelley's point of view, Bolton tells the story almost entirely from her point of view. Although *The Olympians* contains much more historical and biographical detail than Kenyon's, and is more serious in tone, Mary's point-of-view is only one of the ways in which it nonetheless conforms to many of the conventions of romance discussed above. Her status as a half-orphan is foregrounded through her

⁷¹ McAleer, p. 150.

⁷² McAleer, p. 150.

⁷³ Guy Bolton, *The Olympians* ([1961] London: Frederick Muller, 1963), p. 5.

relationship with her dead mother, as can be seen from the quotation above; she is a virgin (obviously); she is also something of a Cinderella-figure, burdened with an evil step-mother: 'Mary's visits to her mother's grave had their origin in a family quarrel'. The second Mrs Godwin, or Marianne, as she is known in this text, has chided Mary and Fanny for washing up in cold water, but, 'Mary rebelled. "The water was hot enough when we started," she declared, "but there was such a pile of dishes that the water may have cooled off a little." [...] Tempers flared. Marianne raised her voice angrily. Mary raised her still higher. Fanny dropped a plate, and Marianne slapped her. At this Fanny burst into tears, Mary called her stepmother a tyrant.'⁷⁴

This role is deepened with the arrival of Percy, who lends Godwin money, apparently to 'save' Mary. She expresses her wish to be a governess:

'It seems to be the only thing for which I am suited. And I've got to start earning my living. We all must.'
'But a nursery governess! – do you know what it is like to be one? In most families they are treated as little better than the lower servants[...] You in such a situation, the child of Mary and Godwin? – it's unthinkable.'
'It won't be for ever – at least I hope not.'
'It won't be at all; I will see to that. If your father is unable to support you he must be placed in a position in which he can.'
'You mean you would lend Papa more money?' Her tone was one of distaste.
'Why not? You are clearly made for better things than the teaching of alphabets.'
'You're very kind but you mustn't think of it.'
'The most joy money can bring is in using it to help your friends.'
[...]
'But you surely can't go about offering to save every penniless girl you meet from a menial existence.'
'Not every girl, no... but you most certainly.'⁷⁵

Thus, Mary falls into the 'working girl' convention pointed out above, and discussed by McAleer in *Passion's Fortune*. 'Readers could [...] identify with a heroine who worked for a living. An escapist storyline, moreover, which promised marriage and

⁷⁴ Bolton, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁵ Bolton, pp. 34-5.

(presumably) an end to work would have been very appealing indeed.⁷⁶ One Mills & Boon writer, Mary Burchell, explains: “I always take a nice ordinary girl and put her into a smarter world. But I always let her retain her former simplicity. I don’t think the Cinderella idea ever goes out of date.”⁷⁷

Although Mary Shelley could not easily be characterised as ‘ordinary’, her persona in Bolton’s novel is contrasted in familiar ways with Harriet’s, so that in the two we might see the contrast between the ‘nice, ordinary girl’, who is the heroine, and her ‘sophisticated’ foil. McAleer quotes a writer at Mills & Boon in the 1950s who reflects that, “Sophistication is never a desirable quality in heroines[...] That is always an attribute of the villainess, and goes with hardness, selfishness, and greed.”⁷⁸ Obliging, we find that Bolton’s Harriet ‘dressed modishly and wore an expensive bonnet’, thus signalling her superficiality, compounded when she would rather discuss the ‘new silks that were appearing in the London shops’ than answer Godwin’s questions about the political situation in Ireland.⁷⁹ After Mary and Percy’s elopement, Harriet appears only as his disembodied creditor, making constant financial demands, and Mary wonders ‘why she is so bitter, so cruelly vindictive?’⁸⁰ In her physical appearance too, Bolton makes a contrast between the two women: where Harriet is presented as the urban fashionable lady, Mary, because of her time in Scotland, can be counterpointed as a fresh, country girl (although it means sacrificing historical verisimilitude): ‘Mary’s cheeks were glowing from the fresh breeze and her blonde curls showed to advantage against the faint sun tan.’⁸¹ This can be compared with an extract from a novel quoted by McAleer in which the hero notes approvingly of the heroine “He did like simple and natural people [...] Just a sun-browned, human young woman, with brown hair, straight as God intended it to be, except for that one delightful wave tumbling across her flushed cheek.”⁸²

As well as this, we can see her presented as the familiar figure of the ‘spirited heroine’ delineated by Helen Hughes in *The Historical Romance*. These share many of the attributes of the modern-day heroines to be found in the Mills & Boon novels. In all of these novels, the same rhetoric of ‘naturalness’ is deployed in their

⁷⁶ McAleer, p. 152.

⁷⁷ McAleer, p. 152.

⁷⁸ McAleer, p. 199.

⁷⁹ Bolton, pp. 22 & 25.

⁸⁰ Bolton, p. 94.

⁸¹ Bolton, p. 20.

⁸² McAleer, p. 165.

characterisation. Hughes describes a typical Georgette Heyer heroine, who has 'a strong will, a sense of independence and a natural directness of behaviour which shows her ignorance of the rules of polite society.'⁸³ This she has gained partly from her wealth, but also from her 'country upbringing'. Thus, the presence of far more biographical detail in Bolton's novel, as well as filling out Mary Shelley's fictional persona, means that he has more material to draw on for the process of romanticisation. Her time in Scotland can be put to good use, so that although not originally a country girl, she can become 'countrified' for the benefit of her meeting with the urban sophisticates, Percy and Harriet. The 'natural directness of behaviour' mentioned by Hughes above, is demonstrated in Mary's relationship with Robbie Baxter, one of the sons of the Baxter family with whom she is staying. She says something that apparently shocks him and 'gave her head a defiant little toss and turned away from him. He gazed at her admiringly. There was colour in her cheeks which had not been there when she came from London.'⁸⁴ He then suggests that underneath her bravado she is in reality just a 'sweet girl':

'Sweet girl,' echoed Mary, wrinkling her pretty nose in distaste. 'Who wants to be a sweet girl? I'd like to be strong and brave and – and intelligent. Yes, and independent, able to think for myself.'

'What if the man you marry thinks different from what you do?'

'Then,' answered Mary promptly, 'if he's cleverer than I am, he'll convince me. If he's stupider than I am, I'll convince him. And if we're both the same we'll be set for a long battle.'⁸⁵

But, as Hughes points out, the heroine always meets her match and succumbs to the demands of more conventional social mores. Thus, when Mary meets Percy and finds herself falling in love with him, she wonders rapturously 'What joy to bear him a child! What a divine privilege to bring into the world a being stamped with his image!'⁸⁶

Although Percy cannot conceivably be moulded into the 'brute hero' discussed by Hughes without doing violence to the historical realism Bolton clearly aspires to,

⁸³ Helen Hughes, p. 117.

⁸⁴ Bolton, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Bolton, p. 19.

⁸⁶ Bolton, pp. 43-4.

Mary nevertheless submits to his superior intellect, and social status (demonstrated by his financial rescue of her). However spirited the heroine, she always fails the challenge of the first kiss (whether punishing or not), and *The Olympians* is no exception in this regard: ‘Their lips met and clung. Her arms went around him and she drew him close. Her body moved against his with a delicate sensuousness. Where had this instinct of abandonment come from? She longed to give herself to him in complete surrender.’⁸⁷ Moreover, although McAleer does not mention the trend, it seems heroes, more often than not, have blue eyes: “Tom’s blue eyes were like blue fire”; “His were the deepest, clearest blue she had ever seen, a real cobalt blue.”; “A tall, broad-shouldered man, with an austere, tanned face and pair of the coldest blue eyes Catherine had ever seen.”⁸⁸ The familiar description of Percy found from *Ariel* onwards, thus slots neatly into this tradition when a besotted Fanny notes, ‘His eyes were of a rare cornflower blue, large and dark-lashed’.⁸⁹ McAleer also notes a trend of large-handed heroes (presumably able to handle anything),⁹⁰ and thus Mary is comforted when she realises that, ‘His hands, for all their delicacy, felt strong and capable. He was so confident in his brave defiance’.⁹¹

Bolton’s novel conforms to many of the conventions of the romance genre, configuring both Mary and Percy as embattled hero and heroine, she finding ultimate fulfilment in her domestic role of marriage, childbearing and the realisation of her ‘sacred charge: the guardianship of genius.’⁹² However, the shifts in narrative strategy that have taken place over the years, partly in response to generic demands, but also in Bolton’s case, to a wish for increased historical authenticity, mean that the Mary Shelley found in *The Olympians* also differs in a number of ways from the images of her encountered so far. The primary reason for this has been noted already: in conforming to one of the central tenets of romance fiction – that the story be told from the heroine’s point-of-view – Mary Shelley has thus been rendered the true centre of the story, even though it ostensibly belongs to Percy. As a result of this more attention is paid to the details of her life. The reader hears, for the first time in these fictions, of her sojourn with the Baxter family in Scotland during her adolescence, as well as of her relationship with one of its sons, Robbie Baxter, which

⁸⁷ Bolton, p. 43.

⁸⁸ McAleer, pp. 154 & 201-2.

⁸⁹ Bolton, pp. 15-16.

⁹⁰ McAleer, p. 200.

⁹¹ Bolton, p. 110.

⁹² Bolton, p. 76.

up until this time had not even appeared in her biographies.⁹³ The effect is to render her an autonomous character, separate from Percy, similar to that seen in Rupert Hughes' *The Man Without a Home*, but here central to the text. She is no longer the figure from Helen Moore's biography whose life was empty before Percy came, and 'after his death it was the tomb from which her lord had risen'.⁹⁴

Bolton's penchant for historical detail, which means the reader hears more of Percy's political beliefs than in previous fictions, also means we hear more, for instance of the historical context of their 1814 elopement to France:

As they moved farther from Paris they passed through scenes of appalling desolation, still unripened crops trampled by the myriad hoofs of mounted troops bent on vengeful devastation. [...] At a farmhouse only partially destroyed they asked for milk, but were told that the Czar's Tartar hordes had systematically butchered all the cattle.⁹⁵

We also hear more of Godwin's limping publishing business, and his inability to support his children into adulthood: 'All except young William must find themselves employment [...] Charles Clairmont was already working for Constable, the Edinburgh publishers, Jane was making vague efforts at becoming an actress, while Fanny was fully occupied with *The Juvenile Library*.'⁹⁶ Significantly in this context we also find that 'Mary longed to be a writer'.⁹⁷ Bolton places far more emphasis on her literary ambitions than previous writers: where her creativity has been the source of her uncanniness in Pollock's *The Moth and the Star*, or of mediocrity in the earlier *Eagle-Feather*, in *The Olympians* it shares equal status with other aspects of her character, albeit one that is also a sign of her suitability for Percy. In Scotland, as Mary Shelley herself informed her public in 1831, 'she painted a series of word pictures, telling with dramatic effect of a ride up into the hills',⁹⁸ and she is later praised by Aaron Burr, American ambassador and friend of the Godwin's: "the

⁹³ In fact, the story of this pre-Percy romance did not appear in a biography of Mary Shelley (not even in passing) until Emily Sunstein's in 1989.

⁹⁴ Moore, p. 10.

⁹⁵ Bolton, pp. 81-2.

⁹⁶ Bolton, p. 31.

⁹⁷ Bolton, p. 31.

⁹⁸ Bolton, p. 15.

legends you told of. You put real life in them. There's no doubt you've a pen that will be heard from".⁹⁹

Because of this emphasis Bolton is the first novelist so far to depict the summer of 1816 at the Villa Diodati in any detail. Kenyon presents that period in epistolary form, in letters from Percy Shelley to Hogg, in which *Frankenstein* is created in a postscript. This of course matches Kenyon's lack of interest in *any* of his characters' professional activities, as one reviewer complained at the time: 'Shelley, after all, was a great poet, but nowhere is this really apparent – and that has to be scored against the book.'¹⁰⁰ Conversely, Bolton's fiction places as much emphasis on the historical and the biographical elements of his work as the romantic, and so Diodati figures more prominently than it has done in previous stories. It is the setting for Claire's romance with Byron, which we hear of in some detail – she turning into another counterpoint for Mary, flighty and fast, as opposed to the latter's steadiness. It is also the setting for the 'ghost-story contest' that the 1831 Introduction refers to, and becomes also the setting for the revelation of Mary's talent. Before Byron has made his challenge to the others and announced that 'we will publish them all together', the friends engage in a more informal round of ghost-stories, at which Mary excels:

Byron listened, watching her with a newly awakened interest. 'Whose story is it?' he asked.

'No one's. It was something I scribbled to amuse myself.' There was a general murmur of astonishment.

'But my dear Mary,' said Byron, 'you are not only the child of two writers and the companion of another, you are a writer yourself.'¹⁰¹

Thus Bolton's novel, as evinced by his title as much as anything, appears in fact to be more a portrait of an artistic community rather than of any individual, and Mary Shelley takes her place in it as an admired participant (if not equal).

Thus, by degrees she has moved to the centre of the Shelley story, taking her authorship of *Frankenstein* and the story of its conception at Diodati with her. It is a story taken up in earnest by novelists at the end of the decade, and as we move into

⁹⁹ Bolton, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas C. Chubb, review of *The Golden Years*, *The Saturday Review*, 22 August 1959, p. 14

¹⁰¹ Bolton, pp. 166-7.

the 1970s, stories containing Mary Shelley and others in her circle begin to proliferate. Perhaps, rather obviously, this is a result of the relaxation of sexual mores that occurred through the 1960s: where the Shelleys' sexual progressiveness was too 'racy' for much of the romance fiction of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, it became more acceptable for the popular audience from the 1960s onwards. Helen Hughes argues that traditional critical opinion tends to divide historical fiction into two broad categories, according to use of historical setting. In more popular fictions, they are used as a 'pretext' for their plots, serving simply as an exotic background for stock events and characters which would otherwise appear lifeless and clichéd. In more 'worthy' kinds of fiction, they serve as a method of exploring parallels and continuities between past and present, and thereby of accessing some historical insight. These methodologies are generally seen by critics as mutually exclusive, but Hughes argues that they can in fact coexist in the same fiction:

The past setting may in such texts appear to add to the pleasure of the book because it can be presented as more colourful and exciting than the everyday life of the reader; but it may also be seen as the amniotic fluid in which the seeds of the present float. Tendencies can be isolated in a historic period, which, however alien that time may seem, none the less prefigure characteristics of the contemporary world.¹⁰²

Thus, although the Shelleys' lives were too adventurous for them to be accepted as mainstream romantic figures, wherever they have appeared they have often done so as versions of whatever social rebel happened to be current at that time. Thus, Richard Holmes described *Ariel* as 'a sort of Jazz Age biography of the "bright young things"',¹⁰³ and the characters of *The Golden Years* were described in one review as 'beatniks'.¹⁰⁴ In the next group of prose fictions, published from the late 1960s to the present day, it will be possible to see how, in the 1970s and 80s their use of narcotics and experiments with communal living were foregrounded and they become recast as prototypical hippies and rock-stars.

¹⁰² Helen Hughes, p. 4.

¹⁰³ This appears in the blurb written by Holmes for a paperback edition of *Ariel*, published by Pimlico (London) in 1991.

¹⁰⁴ Chubb.

3. The True Story of *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley in Prose Fiction, 1960s - Present.

In this chapter I will extend the discussion of narrative prose fictions begun in the previous chapter to cover those published from the late 1960s to the present day. These novels form a heterogeneous group of texts that appear to share little in common other than containing fictional representations of the late Romantics. The representations of Mary Shelley to be found in them are correspondingly various: she may be the narrator of an entire novel, as is the case in Anne Edwards' *Haunted Summer* (1972) or may appear only quietly in the background (Paul West's *Lord Byron's Doctor* (1989)); she may be 'the sensible Mary Godwin' of Tim Powers' *The Stress of Her Regard* (1993), or the sexual libertine of Federico Andahazi's *The Merciful Women* (1998). To render this large group of texts manageable I have divided the chapter into two sections, the first devoted to those in which Mary Shelley is a central figure (Major Roles), and the second to those in which she appears only briefly (Cameo Appearances).

The one feature that nearly all the texts have in common is that they each provide an explanation of the genesis of *Frankenstein*. It is these features - their heterogeneity, and their engagement with *Frankenstein* - that distinguish the novels discussed here from those in Chapter Two. Where the earlier fictions fall broadly into the genre of romantic fiction, the later are generically various, incorporating science-fiction, fantasy, and Gothic, as well as some less easy to categorise texts such as Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters* (1991), Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) and the aforementioned *Lord Byron's Doctor*. The increase in 'fantastic' forms of narrative can certainly be accounted for by the increased presence of *Frankenstein* as an intertext, which can itself be accounted for by the growing literary profile of Mary Shelley. Diodati is now not only the site of the first meeting between Byron and Shelley, but also where Mary Shelley is known to have conceived the idea for her novel. Although this information had appeared in popular form as early as 1935 in James Whale's prologue to his film, *Bride of Frankenstein*¹, it does not seem to filter into the popular imagination until an article appeared in *Life* magazine in 1968.

¹ In which Mary provides an account of the origins of the story to Byron and Shelley.

Written to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the monster's 'birth', its opening paragraphs evoke the scene in Whale's film as a preamble to an explanation of how Mary Shelley came to write about the famous monster.² The seeds sown by the films have begun to germinate: in the raised profile of the novel and its author; and more specifically in the growing attention paid to the scene of *Frankenstein's* creation, the Villa Diodati in 1816. The presence there of those glamorous figures, Byron and Shelley, draws many novelists to the setting, but once drawn their attention is caught by the quieter talent sitting on the margins, but who has a more compelling tale to tell. A year after the article in *Life*, Derek Marlowe's *A Single Summer with L.B.* (1969) appeared, the first of many fictional rewritings of that primal scene, bringing into being a legend nearly as potent as *Frankenstein* itself.

It is by exploring this scene that novelists hope (amongst other things) to come across the answer to the very question Mary Shelley herself claimed to be answering in her introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel: 'How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?'³ Clearly the answer she provided in that introduction is not regarded as sufficiently convincing for many readers, and so the assumption underlying many of these fictions is that there is another narrative about the summer of 1816 that has yet to be told, and has not yet been told in any biography. Another assumption that is at work in the explanation of the genesis of *Frankenstein* is that it needs to be explained at all. The creation of other works produced during that summer, for example Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon*, and Percy Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' are not seen as requiring explanation: their existence is self-explanatory. But Mary Shelley's youth and sex are enough to render the origins of her novel a mystery that is not sufficiently accounted for in that Introduction. And they are certainly not accounted for in contemporaneous documents, as the portion of her journal that covers the initial creation of *Frankenstein* is tantalisingly missing.⁴

² Samuel Rosenberg, 'The Horrible Truth About Frankenstein', *Life*, 1 April 1968, pp. 40-48.

³ Shelley, p. 169.

⁴ The missing portion covers the period from 13 May 1815 to 21 July 1816. The Shelleys arrived at Lake Geneva on 13 May 1816, and moved to the Villa Chappuis on about 3 June. Mary Shelley is thought to have started *Frankenstein* some time between 10 June (when Byron and Polidori moved into Diodati) and 16 June (when Polidori records that 'The ghost-stories are begun by all but me.'). This information is from *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman & Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 VOLS (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I, pp. 103, 107, & 118.

However, it is not just Mary Shelley's age and gender that intrigues anyone who seeks the origins of *Frankenstein*. Of all the works produced that summer, *Frankenstein* is easily the most famous because it has become a modern myth. Its modernity means that not only does it strike a more resonant chord with readers than, say, the myth of Prometheus, but it also means that its origins are accessible to us because they lie in a period from which there is masses of documentary evidence available. Thus, notwithstanding Mary's missing journal, the opportunity has arisen to trace the origins of a myth and this has proved irresistible to many looking back to that period for inspiration. As Frederick L. Jones pointed out: '[Her] journal is the richest mine of information about Shelley's daily life: where he lived, where he went, and who he saw from day to day.'⁵ If this is the case for Percy, then the same must hold true for its revelation of Mary's activities, and thus, along with her letters, and the letters and journals of everyone else present, the raw materials exist for the reconstruction of how the myth of *Frankenstein* came into being. The story of how Mary Shelley created *Frankenstein* can be seen as a myth of origins nearly as powerful as that of Prometheus, Adam, or *Frankenstein* itself.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her book *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1976) argues that certain formal features of many Gothic novels actually express a central Gothic theme: the structure of the Chinese-box narrative and the presence of disintegrating or illegible manuscripts which are common to many Gothic novels all metaphorically express the presence of the 'unspeakable' in the text. The gap in Mary Shelley's biographical narrative constituted by the missing portion of her journal therefore acts as a magnet for those who would seek to speak the unspeakable. They become like the Polidori of Paul West's *Lord Byron's Doctor* excited at the opportunity to give Mary Godwin a medical examination, and thus peer into 'the abyss of Victor Frankenstein'.⁶ As shall become clear over the course of this chapter, it is something all those who attempt it signally fail to do. Although the fictions that use Diodati as a setting become infected by the Gothic of *Frankenstein*, the story of the origins of that novel must remain a mystery.

As well as the wish to explain *Frankenstein*, the presence of the character of Mary Shelley in these novels can be explained by two other factors: the development of her critical reputation and the increasing experimentalism of post-modern fiction.

⁵ *Mary Shelley's Journal*, p. viii.

⁶ Paul West, *Lord Byron's Doctor* ([1989] London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), p. 146.

Through the work of many critics Mary Shelley became what can only be described as a feminist icon, as her life and reputation came, to a certain extent, to represent the story of women in literary history. She is the author of a powerful and dense literary work that became a modern myth, but which for 150 years was dismissed as popular fiction (an assessment only helped by the film productions of the twentieth century). She too was marginalised as a trivial author of trash, overshadowed by the much more famous and weightier authors with whom she was closely associated. Slowly, in the latter half of the twentieth century, her reputation began gradually to be resuscitated, as the feminist project of rescuing those sidelined by literary history has gathered momentum. This is also the activity of celebrating marginality and bringing it (paradoxically) into the centre of literary debate. It is a process that can be seen enacted in the development of the fictional figure of Mary Shelley, as she moves to centre-stage in a number of novels in this period.

Her presence, and indeed that of many Romantic figures, in fiction of the second half of the century can also be largely explained by the increasing use of history by novelists, and the post-modern acknowledgement (first addressed by the Modernist biographers at the beginning of the century) that boundaries between fictional and biographical/historical discourses are highly porous. Where the Modernists questioned the assumption that biography was primarily a factual discourse, post-modernists also question the assumption that fiction is necessarily invention. The project of rescuing marginal figures from the maw of historical oblivion has been no less a part of the creative practice of fiction than it has part of theoretical debates, and one from which the fictional figure of Mary Shelley has benefited.

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However, the rescue-mission had not yet started when Derek Marlowe's *A Single Summer with L.B.* was published in 1969. As its title suggests, it centres upon the figure of Byron, much of the story told from the viewpoint of his doctor, Polidori (one of three texts discussed in this chapter to use this device). As the title also suggests it tells the story of the summer of 1816 at Diodati: the meeting of Byron and Percy, their trip around the lake, the evening spent reading *Fantasmagoriana*, the writing of *Frankenstein*, Claire's pregnancy and obviously Polidori's own adventures

amongst the society of Geneva. Polidori's narration is given in the form of letters home to his sister Florence and the story of the exploits of the group at Diodati and Chappuis are filled out with social and historical background of the time. So, for example, Beau Brummell left for the continent at almost exactly the same time as Byron, and Marlowe's inclusion of this as a kind of back-story to the main narrative both establishes a parallel between the two society darlings (as Byron once was) and also serves as a pretext for describing the social circles that took an interest in their activities: 'The social lions had fled to the Continent, and it was the society who had cast them out who were the first to mourn their departure [...] And so, bored and restless, the players found themselves obliged to pursue the fugitives, in a vain attempt to relieve the ennui they had created.'⁷ Thus the presence of the gossips at Secheron from whom Byron escaped to Diodati is explained. Other examples of this kind of historical contextualisation are Byron and Polidori's travels through the battlefields at Waterloo, and their visit to Madame de Staël.

The novel opens with a description of the Shelleys *en route* to Geneva via the channel.⁸ The initial description of Mary Godwin is not promising: having described her and Percy as sharing some facial characteristics, the narrator goes on,

There, however, the resemblance ends. If one could lower the woollen scarf and see the girl's mouth, it would be with disappointment. Not full and sensuous [...] like the young man's but thin, tight, almost spinsterish. The mouth of a friend's great-aunt, even at the best of times. At worst, that narrow upper lip and those deadly even teeth could well belong to a fragile and rather precious lizard.⁹

She is immediately established here not just as unattractive, but even as someone to be feared as not quite human. This serves to establish her as the thrillingly uncanny author of *Frankenstein*. Having established her physical appearance, the reader soon receives an indication of her mental qualities. Polidori watches her from the balcony at Diodati, walking up and down, reading a novel: 'Now and again, she would stop and stare ahead of her, pensively, then hurry to a larger book lying on a garden seat

⁷ Derek Marlowe, *A Single Summer with L.B.* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 59.

⁸ Although neither Claire nor Mary (at this time) bore the name Shelley, I have used this plural to refer collectively to them and Percy, as they spent so much time in each other's company (in both fiction and history) it is easier to refer to them as a unit.

⁹ Marlowe, p. 10.

which seemed to be a dictionary'. He calls to ask her what she is reading, and whether it is in English. She replies, "No, in Italian. I'm trying to learn it," and then, her voice louder, "I *must* learn it."¹⁰ Thus her intellectual determination and ambition are established.

However, it is in a later, longer exchange that Polidori has with her that her characterisation is crystallised. They are walking together around the gardens of the hotel one twilight evening (they have not moved to their private villas as yet), and although Polidori stresses 'Mrs Shelley is almost always *polite*' he also felt himself 'somewhat ill at ease, as if about to witness something evil.' This is exacerbated when 'I felt her touch my hand. At first I imagined it to be a bat or perhaps a leaf on a tree that had brushed against me, but it was repeated. [...] The hand that touched me was as cold as winter. It was like the hand of a corpse.'¹¹ He asks her if she is cold, but there is no response, and she walks away. She continues talking, and the subject matter of her conversation turns to her dead baby, quotation of Ophelia, and the description of the construction of an infant's coffin. Polidori's growing alarm crescendos when Mary begins talking of her courtship with Percy: '*It was in a cemetery, she told me, upon my mother's grave. And then she asked, Do you not find graveyards very sensual, Doctor Polidori?*'¹² Polidori can take no more and returns as soon as he can to the hotel. He concludes, 'by day, fortunately, she is seemingly very pleasant, but this dark side belongs to the Devil.'¹³ Polidori describes the young Mary Godwin as a woman who finds death not only interesting, and an appropriate subject for polite discussion, but, even further, a source of sexual excitement. She is compared to a corpse (which is itself an implicit comparison with her monster), and the whole of her horror for him seems to lie in her doubleness: she is alive, yet corpse-like; she discusses horror politely, and links sex with death; she is pleasant by day, 'the Devil' by night. Thus she is 'explained' to us in terms that will ultimately make sense of her creation of 'one of the most original novels of the century,' a central event in Marlowe's novel. Having moved into their respective lakeside homes, the two households begin their stimulating yet complex and difficult interaction: Claire's pursuit of Byron, her pregnancy, his cruelty, Byron and Percy's disagreements, Polidori's jealousy of them all. The event that is to bring them all together is the

¹⁰ Marlowe, p. 68.

¹¹ Marlowe, pp. 71-2.

¹² Marlowe, p. 72 (Marlowe's emphasis).

¹³ Marlowe, p. 73.

reading of *Fantasmagoriana*, the collection of stories that, according to the 1831 Introduction, inspired Byron's suggestion of a ghost-story competition:

The moment it was read all past quarrels, squabbles, philosophies, polemics were put aside as a new theme took over their thoughts. It was a subject that had fascinated others for centuries and which now, in this ill-lit room battered by rain and storm, was to enthral the occupants for days, even weeks, and was to make one of them instantaneously and surprisingly famous.¹⁴

Although *A Single Summer with L.B.* is not a Gothic novel, it possesses too many Gothic trappings to be overlooked. The scene between Mary and Polidori above is one example of how a Gothic atmosphere is created at certain points in the novel, but there are other, structural features that associate it with the genre. As noted above, there are various formal features that define Gothic, one of these being the presence of narratives interpolated from other texts: in Marlowe's novel, most obvious are the invented letters from Polidori to his sister, real letters written by the protagonists, and other quotations from genuine sources of the time. Another convention of many Gothic novels was the claim for the text's authenticity made directly by the author himself (as Horace Walpole did with *The Castle of Otranto* [1764]) or by an invented editor (as happens in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* [1824]). In *A Single Summer with L.B.*, Marlowe authenticates his text with an 'Author's Note': 'Apart from John Polidori's letters to Florence, which are the author's creation, all quotations and much of the dialogue are taken solely from the letters and journals of the personages involved, or extracted from contemporary sources.'¹⁵ His open confession of *inauthenticity* (the letters to Florence) makes Marlowe appear open-handed and honest to the reader, and so makes the next claim to authenticity appear doubly genuine. This open merging of fact and fiction is continued in the text by the presence in the text of scholarly footnotes, which echo the effect of the 'Author's Note'. Thus, the reader can hear of the arrival of Byron at Secheron in the fictional narrative: 'It was as [Claire] slept at last that Byron arrived in the dead of night, tired and in secret, and dismounted from his bizarre

¹⁴ Marlowe, p. 113.

¹⁵ Marlowe, p. 6.

Napoleonic carriage* into the courtyard below her window'.¹⁶ In reading the footnote attached to the asterisk (informing us that Byron really did travel in such a coach and the author's source for this information) the fictional text is indirectly made to appear as authentic as the real information. Marlowe is telling us the 'true' story of Diodati.

However his inclusion of original documents is what ultimately undermines his claim to authenticity: in telling the story of the creation of *Frankenstein* he intersperses his own fictional narrative with italicised quotation from the 1831 introduction. Thus the reader discovers that 'It had been the worst of nights for Mary but it was not over yet. It was not till the early hours of the morning that she finally retired to her room, but the events and discussions of the evening had disturbed her and she could not relax. *When I placed my head upon the pillow I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me*'.¹⁷ In a narrative depicting events that took place in 1816, Marlowe quotes from a text written fifteen years later, as if written in the same time frame. Marlowe falls for the fiction that Mary Shelley herself created in the 1831 Introduction that this was a true story, rather than the product of unstable memories and deliberate invention. In her essay 'The Art of Biography', Virginia Woolf explores the difference between fiction and biography:

The invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only - the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision. The world created by that vision is rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people. And because of this difference the two kinds of fact will not mix; if they touch they destroy each other. No one, the conclusion seems to be, can make the best of both worlds; you must choose, and you must abide by your choice.¹⁸

In *A Single Summer with L.B.* it seems Derek Marlowe is trying to make the best of both worlds - the authenticity of fact; the vividness of fiction - but in mixing the two in the way he has, they compromise each other. It also undermines whatever Gothicism there is in Marlowe's text: his claim to be telling us the true story, to be speaking the unspeakable contradicts his other aim, which is to tell us a ghost-story.

¹⁶ Marlowe, p. 37.

¹⁷ Marlowe, p. 133.

¹⁸ Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', p. 124.

To achieve its full effect as such, it must to some extent, retain a sense of mystery, of the unspeakable, at its heart.

Anne Edwards also uses Mary Shelley's own words but in the case of *Haunted Summer* (1972), the story is told entirely in her voice, and as the text is a fictional recreation of the missing portion of Mary Shelley's journal the words are largely invented. Like Marlowe, Edwards presents us with various authenticating devices for her narrative, the main one being the use of the voice of Mary Shelley herself. Another is the invocation of the genuinely missing journal as the rationale behind the production of this reconstructed story. Unlike Marlowe's devices, however, they are presented within a genuinely framed structure which is a deliberate echo of the structure of *Frankenstein*. The main narrative of *Haunted Summer* is preceded both by a Preface in which the older Mary Shelley explains the reasons for producing this new account of events at Diodati (lost journal, newly found letters) and by a Prologue in which Mary Shelley revisits St Pancras churchyard as the cue for her memories of 1816: 'That summer when we left England, taking Claire and all our expectations with us to Switzerland [...] that summer lingers on like bars of a known air and seems to be a wind rousing from its depths every deep-seated emotion of my heart.'¹⁹ This is followed by the text of *Haunted Summer* which ends at the end of the summer of 1816, and is followed by an Epilogue that tells of Percy's death and the rest of Mary's life. This in turn is followed by a Postscript in which she briefly excuses herself for quoting her own writings so extensively (thereby excusing Edwards from the same theft). The difference between this structure and that of *Frankenstein* is of course that where each of the frames of the earlier novel is told in a different voice (Walton's, Frankenstein's, the monster's), the frames of Edwards novel are all in Mary Shelley's own voice.

Edwards has also fictionalised the events so that the narrative at the centre of these frames itself contains other narratives. What is usually characterised as the 'ghost-story contest' simply occurred as the result of an off-hand suggestion made by Lord Byron, each participant creating their story individually. In *Haunted Summer* this is extended and formalised so that it takes place over a ritualised series of evenings in the dungeons of Castle Chillon, which is also the setting for Byron's *The*

¹⁹ Anne Edwards, *Haunted Summer* ([1972] London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 19.

Prisoner of Chillon. Byron is the ringleader and suggests they all tell their stories by the pillar to which the original prisoner of Chillon was chained. Thus Edwards intertwines the stories of Byron and Mary, so that the whole narrative structure of *Haunted Summer* later comes to represent their more physical relationship. The Castle also contributes a Gothic element to a historical narrative already rich with Gothic potential: big old house; mountainous scenery; virginal girls; darkly attractive host; visions and ghosts. The house becomes a ruined castle, and the ghost-stories are each told in their entirety by their respective creators, instead of being skimmed over and dismissed in the same terms as Mary Shelley herself uses in the 1831 Introduction. This alteration thus gives *Haunted Summer* the digressive structure of many Gothic novels. Edwards also establishes a Gothic atmosphere through both incident and characterisation. An example of the former is the first boat trip to Chillon:

We were now broadside of Chillon. It was almost totally dark within and without, except for the warning lanterns on the rock walls facing the water. It appeared to brood darkly at us - the water god displeased at the approach of strangers. Claire, who could not possibly see from the position she was in, sat up, and as the wind had spread Polidori's cape about him like a giant bat's wings blocking her view, made to stand to see around him and as she did, the boat tipped crazily.²⁰

Byron's pet monkey falls overboard and drowns, and when they reach the shore Byron makes a funeral pyre for him. Percy's death is thus ominously foreshadowed.

Edwards characterises the relationship between Polidori and Byron as 'of an exceedingly dark nature', and Mary remembers of the former, 'I could not deny his attractiveness. Yet there was something so loathsome about him that as I stood there, my flesh crawled. He was an evil man, I was certain of it'.²¹ This 'dark' relationship hints at homosexuality, but Edwards also makes much of their doctor/patient relationship, which veers into that of scientist/subject when Byron explains that "Poli is writing the secret life of an opium user."²² It later transpires that the opium user is Byron himself. In this way it is hinted that Polidori and Byron are models for

²⁰ Edwards, p. 43.

²¹ Edwards, p. 33.

²² Edwards, p. 56.

Frankenstein (named erroneously throughout as 'Dr' Frankenstein) and his monster. Mary accidentally sees Byron's feet: 'I felt revulsion! Yes! But more acutely I felt a pain that grew to such intensity within me that I thought I might faint. [...] *Both his feet were clubbed, one worse than the other, and his legs withered to the knee, again, one worse than the other. What a curse to chain such a proud and soaring spirit to the dull earth! [...] I thought, the form and features of an Apollo and the feet and legs of a satyr.*'²³ The mixture of horror and sympathy in Mary's response to Byron's deformity clearly marks him as a source of inspiration for her monster.

However, he also inspires her in a more direct way, first by actively encouraging her to write, but also through the growing sexual tension between them that is eventually consummated. This leads Edwards' novel into by now familiar genre territory: we are once again presented with Mary Shelley the swooning romantic heroine, and Byron, rather than Percy, as her dashing suitor. Byron's replacement of Percy as hero also means a more convincing 'punishing kiss' can take place. At the climax of a hostile exchange in which she attempts to resist her growing attraction, she at last succumbs: 'He crushed his lips to mine. It was, at first, a wounding gesture, a blow, and then *oh, who could speak other than of the flesh being capable of the greatest betrayal!* - movement returned to me and I felt a helpless rushing towards him.'²⁴ This leads Mary to conflate the two experiences so that Lord Byron ultimately fathers *Frankenstein*:

Creation was the word that made the burden heavy. For to write a story was one thing, to *create* it, quite another, and I knew this story of mine would and had to be *created*. [...] its seed had been planted. And though I would not share the truth with another, not even Shelley, in my heart I knew that if I be the mother - Lord Byron be the father.²⁵

This also comes as the climax to a sequence of metaphors begun earlier in the story, in which Mary's creative activities are compared to pregnancy and birth, the first of many such connections to be made in fiction, biography and criticism over the next few years. She tells us that 'I was a woman in labour' and that 'My story was beginning to take form. The very night of Shelley's *theatrical* marked its first throb

²³ Edwards, p. 235. The text in italics is a quotation from Trelawny's *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), p.224.

²⁴ Edwards, p. 197 (Edwards' emphasis).

²⁵ Edwards, p. 239 (Edwards' emphasis)

of life. [...] Torn between my loyalty to its development and Shelley's needs, I found to my bewilderment that it was this unborn fetus of creativity within me to whom I had become aligned.'²⁶ In constructing Mary Shelley's creative act as being akin to that of biological creation Edwards foregrounds it as a natural, unconscious act over which Mary Shelley has no control or agency.

Her passivity has been established through her relationship with Byron (she helplessly succumbs to him, and he has 'planted' the seed), and it is only reinforced when, in the telling of her story as part of the series of evenings at Chillon, she comes to identify with the monster. She had started the tale in sympathy with Victor, her fellow creator, but suddenly, without realising, 'An incredible thing seemed to occur. No longer did I feel as Dr. Frankenstein, but - as that hideous monster. I felt the flesh of my arms and traced the structure of my face. But if I were *he*, how would my own touch know my distortion? It was my heart, my mind. I was that creature. I knew no doubt.'²⁷ The basis for this identification is made ever clearer when she cries out 'You are my Creator. You infused me with the brain of a great philosopher, and with the heart of a *woman*. A heart fashioned to be susceptible of love. And yet...you made of me...a monster!'²⁸ *Frankenstein* has become an expression of Mary Shelley's own feelings of passivity in the face of those who have created her: Byron, and, as is hinted by Byron when he tells her of her novel "It shall be about your father, of course"²⁹

This is the 'unspeakable' at the heart of *Frankenstein* that Edwards seeks to articulate: the horror that the monster was Mary Shelley herself. This is clearly similar to Derek Marlowe's conclusion in *A Single Summer with L.B.* that the story of *Frankenstein* was monstrous because it was created by an unnaturally monstrous woman. However, because of Edwards' slightly more perceptive reading of *Frankenstein*, the depiction of Mary Shelley in *Haunted Summer* is far more sympathetic than that to be found in Marlowe's novel. The monster (and by extension, Mary) is an outcast to be pitied, rather than an artificial creation to be reviled. She may be a monster, that freak of nature that is an intellectual woman, but her monstrosity is not something of her own making, and thus we forgive her. Despite this though, has Edwards succeeded in making a convincing account of 'what

²⁶ Edwards, pp. 211-12 (Edwards' emphasis).

²⁷ Edwards, p. 258.

²⁸ Edwards, p. 259 (Edwards' emphasis).

²⁹ Edwards, p. 168.

really happened'? It could be argued that for all the authenticating devices that constitute the narrative framework of *Haunted Summer*, by utilising other, more overtly fictive generic conventions from both Gothic and romantic modes, Edwards undermines any attempt she might make to claim for the status of her text as a truth-telling document. Especially when, in the Epilogue, she has Mary Shelley tell us 'Shelley died by drowning off the coast of Italy only four weeks short of his twenty-ninth birthday and twelve weeks short of my twenty-sixth.'³⁰ At the time of his death, Percy Shelley was in fact four weeks short of his thirtieth birthday, and Mary around seven weeks short of her twenty-fifth birthday. There is no valid narrative rationale behind the changing of these dates (as there is behind her alteration of other dates), so the informed reader can only conclude that Edwards simply got them wrong. Similarly, the presence of Edwards' Author's Note at the end, detailing all the factual sources of *Haunted Summer* has the effect of the same devices in Marlowe's text: by speaking the unspeakable, it ultimately undermines the Gothic frames and atmosphere of the text.

Anne Edwards' depiction of Mary Shelley is determined largely by her particular reading of *Frankenstein* and her attempt to reveal its origins to the reader, and these same determining forces are to be found working in Brian Aldiss's depiction of Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973). However, where Edwards' reading, and consequently her novel, centred upon Gothic interpretations of Shelley's text, Aldiss's reading of *Frankenstein* as science fiction and his own capacity as a science fiction writer means *Frankenstein Unbound* is inevitably in that mode. Aldiss's hero is a retired government aide, Joseph Bodenland living in 2020 America, on a planet in crisis: 'The fabric of space/time has been ruptured and reality - whatever that may be - is breaking down' as a result of 'nuclear activity'.³¹ The result of this is the increasing frequency of 'timeslips' in which time folds in on itself and causes experiences of time/space-travel. In just such a timeslip, Bodenland is hurled back (and across) to Geneva in 1816. Here he meets Victor Frankenstein, and later, Mary Godwin, realising that it is not only the boundaries between times and places that are breaking down, but between fiction and reality itself: as Mary writes *Frankenstein*, the events and characters of the novel gradually come into being. Aldiss reads *Frankenstein* as

³⁰ Edwards, pp. 269-70.

³¹ Brian Aldiss, *Frankenstein Unbound* ([1973] London: Pan, 1975), pp. 10 & 11.

science-fiction and therefore as a warning against unchecked scientific progress, so his narrative has the odd consequence of making Mary Shelley simultaneously the one who has the foresight to see and warn against the consequences of overweening scientific ambition, and the person who inadvertently brings those terrible consequences into being. Bodenland sees one of those terrible consequences as the 'rupture of space/time' that has happened in his own age, and so he sees his duty as finding the initial cause of this and destroying it: Victor Frankenstein and his monster, the (now) living symbol of the dangers of science. His search for and encounter with them provides the basis for the narrative of *Frankenstein Unbound*.

Bodenland, realising the barriers between fiction and reality have broken down, believes that 'If I could borrow a copy of Mary's book, I could map its route, ambush it and kill it!'³² He doesn't find a copy of the novel (as it is in the process of being written) but he does fortuitously bump into Byron, who then introduces him to Percy, Claire, Polidori, and most importantly, Mary Godwin herself. Understandably, Bodenland is almost overcome with excitement, but he manages to keep his head, reeling as it is with the thought of himself among some of the most famous figures in literary history. Through him the reader listens to Byron and Percy's dialogue about their social and political views. Percy is the idealist, who foresees that,

'With the elements as slaves, then for the first time in history slavery will be abolished. Human servitude will disappear, for servitors in the form of machines, powered by steam and electricity, will take over. And that means that a day of universal socialism will dawn. For the first time, there will be no masters and inferiors. All will be equal!'

Byron is the cynic, whose response is typical "...I don't aspire to your Promethean vision of man. I see him as a servile little bugger!" Next to these two opinionated and charismatic figures, Mary can only ask timidly "Don't you think mankind will have to change its basic nature a little before that happens, Percy?"³³

Of course, the combined effects of Byron and Percy's company are Bodenland's awe and Mary's timidity, and they are unable to have a particularly fruitful exchange until the next day. The others have gone for a trip round the lake,

³² Aldiss, p. 67.

³³ Aldiss, p. 62.

leaving Mary and Joseph alone at the Villa Chappuis. He accidentally walks in on her nursing William, and is not sure of the polite thing to do, when Mary motions him to stay. She tells him she did not go on the trip with the others, not only because 'little Wilmouse' is ill, but also because "I understand you wished to speak with me". He remarks on her consideration and she replies "It was not so much consideration as intuition, for something tells me that you visit me with some strange intelligence".³⁴ Thus Bodenland receives his cue to reveal his true identity as an emissary from the future. He explains his mission, asks for her help, and they go on to discuss *Frankenstein*. Mary describes the central scene of *Frankenstein*: "I saw the engine powerfully at work, its wires running to a monstrous figure, about which the scientist flitted in nervous excitement. Presently the figure sat up in its bandages. At that, the scientist who had played God was dismayed with his handiwork, as was God with our general ancestor, Adam, though with less reason."³⁵ Aldiss's own voice is audibly chiming behind this description, first in the anachronistic use of the word 'scientist' and also in the fact that this description owes far more to the film images of *Frankenstein* than the novel itself (in Shelley's original, there are neither wires, bandages, nor flitting). It is also interesting to note that although earlier in their dialogue, Mary has declared, 'I am not a believer in the Christian religion'³⁶ *Frankenstein* is here described as having 'played God'. She explains how, "The story seems to possess me" and reflects that "Perhaps it stems from a sensation that I am in some way making a prediction of awful catastrophe, and not just telling a story."³⁷ During this exchange they swiftly become close and end up having a fleeting affair, even seeming, temporarily, to fall in love. However, Bodenland, after he has told Mary that her name will go down to posterity, and gleaned the information he needs to pursue the evil *Frankenstein* and monster, must leave to do his duty and save the world.

In this way, Aldiss 'explains' *Frankenstein* primarily as a rejoinder to Percy's idealistic vision of the universe liberated by machinery and the death of God. *Frankenstein* becomes a vision of the machines escaping the control of their masters and enslaving humanity, the monster a symbol of the results of untrammelled science. This is Mary's reply to Percy's excited declaration that "we are marching towards an

³⁴ Aldiss, p. 70.

³⁵ Aldiss, p. 76.

³⁶ Aldiss, p. 71.

³⁷ Aldiss, p. 77.

age, a realm of science, in which goodness will not be trampled underfoot by despair!”³⁸ Embodied as they are in the persons of Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin, these views inevitably become gendered. Percy and Mary inhabit the traditional roles of rational man, and intuitive woman: Mary Godwin’s visionary capacity is almost explicitly tied to her gender in the foregrounding of her maternal role, when, at the same time as nursing William, she declares her ‘intuition’ that Bodenland has something important to tell her. Her creation of *Frankenstein* is the result of her intuition, rather than conscious effort; she is possessed, and becomes the medium for a force greater than herself. In this she is quite distinct from the figure of Mary Shelley in Edwards’ *Haunted Summer*, in which she is quite pointedly, *not* a mother: although little William was present at the Villa Chappuis in 1816, Edwards seems deliberately to leave him out so that she can give free rein to the idea of *Frankenstein* as an intellectual birth. In Edwards’ text *Frankenstein* is Mary’s only creation, and her lack of maternity (as well as her initial physical coolness towards Byron) marks her out as a distinctly intellectual figure, especially when contrasted in the novel with the notably fecund Claire. In Aldiss’s novel, however, once she is out of the company of the intellectual men (with whom she hardly cuts an equal figure), she is characterised primarily as a mother and lover. In both novels, though, *Frankenstein* is created as a result of male sexual attention, and Mary figured as its helpless object.

The urge to probe the origins of *Frankenstein* does not abate, and can be found again in Judith Chernaik’s 1991 novel, *Mab’s Daughters*. Developments in fiction that take place over the intervening twenty years mean that these later texts are markedly different from those discussed up to now (including those in Chapter 2). One of the main changes that has taken place is in the use of historical settings, which has become a much more self-conscious activity on the part of the novelist. They are likely to be used, as Chernaik partly does, to interrogate the nature of history by highlighting its fictive nature. The period which Chernaik chooses to recreate, runs from the summer of 1816 (of course) to the end of 1817, just before the Shelleys embarked for permanent exile in Italy. As well as including (rather dramatically) the suicides of Fanny and Harriet, this is also the period that took in the conception and composition of *Frankenstein*. Unlike Edwards’ and Aldiss’s works, however,

³⁸ Aldiss, p. 62.

Chernaik's shows none of the trappings of either Gothic, science-fiction, or other genres at work in her narrative. There is none of the high melodrama that can be found in the last three novels discussed, and her main concern appears to be primarily a more emotionally realistic rendering of the lives of the Shelleyan women. This is achieved partly through the alternating voices of Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont, Fanny Godwin, and Harriet Shelley. These voices are lent extra authenticity as they come to us in the form of diaries and letters. Thus the reader has the impression of access to a hotline to Mary Shelley's unconscious at the very moment it produced a myth.

The diary form is not, of course, an unproblematic method of representing reality. It has the patina of authenticity, the voice of history speaking directly, unmediated even, through time to the reader in the present, but 'this very intimacy [...] implies simultaneously a high degree of subjectivity and of unreliability, suggesting that there may be only subjective truths.'³⁹ This subjectivity is emphasised in the mutually contradictory accounts of circumstances (for example, the understandably divergent accounts given of Mary and Percy's elopement by Mary herself and the abandoned Harriet Shelley) and relationships (Mary and Claire's entirely different interpretations of the former's relationship with Percy). This is not the only problem with the use of the diary-form: the other is that since the nearly all of the diaries and letters of the subjects exist in published form, the text the reader is presented with here is clearly fictional. Hence the necessity for further authenticating devices: the text is introduced first by an anonymous narrator explaining that the documents have recently come to light in the Library of the East India House, where they were deposited by Thomas Love Peacock before his death. This is followed by Peacock's own address 'To the Reader', explaining how the documents came into his possession.

In the anonymous first section of the preface, the narrator takes immediate pre-emptive measures to forestall any reader's doubts. This is done first by pointing out how, 'All four women were educated and literate [...] They devoted at least an hour each day to writing letters, and they kept journals [...] Everything they wrote was

³⁹ Beate Neumeier, 'The Truth of Fiction - The Fiction of Truth: Judith Chernaik's *Mab's Daughters*.' in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, ed. by Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999), pp. 106-119 (p. 107).

carefully preserved.’⁴⁰ The subtext here informs the reader that the existence of the texts that follow is, firstly, perfectly feasible; we then learn that ‘Gossip provided material for a dozen novels (including several by the chief persons and their friends), half a dozen plays, and, in recent times, films and television drama [...] The bare outlines of the story are familiar enough.’⁴¹ The implication is that what follows will fill in that bare outline, but that the historical documents used will provide a counter to unsubstantiated ‘gossip’. To authenticate the text further, the reader is presented with the letter purportedly written by a real historical figure who knew the Shelleys. Peacock explains the provenance of each set of documents, and his tone is both confessional and disinterested: his loyalty to Percy prevented him from handing these documents over when Mary asked for them; he realises that ‘I cut a rather lamentable figure in these journals’, and so he prizes the truth over his own vanity. All this in order to reinforce the reader’s trust in what follows.

As I have pointed out, the initial narrator remains anonymous and could be seen therefore to destabilise the fiction, which in other respects is maintained convincingly. The reader knows it cannot be Chernaik herself claiming to have found lost diaries and letters, for that would propel the text into the realms of the hoax. But neither does the narrator give him or herself a positive identity, for that would then situate the text firmly in the realm of fiction, and from which the narrator clearly wishes to distance it. Thus, the anonymised preface serves as a kind of decompression chamber in which the reader gradually adjusts to the fictional universe of the novel. In this way, Chernaik never has to claim directly either way for the fictional status of her text: it becomes simply another way of telling the story. The fact that the story is told in the highly subjective form of the diary and the letter whose narratives openly contradict each other (and in ways in which, the reader can guess, the real diaries and letters also must) means that in *Mab’s Daughters* Chernaik is highlighting the contingent nature of historical truth. Part of the project of the novel seems to be to show that all attempts at biography are destabilised by the subjectivity, the ‘fictionality’ even, of the original sources, so that the ‘real’ story is as likely to be found in fiction as anywhere else.⁴² The assumption underneath this project is, of course, that the accounts we have of the period from the real historical

⁴⁰ Judith Chernaik, *Mab’s Daughters* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. v.

⁴¹ Chernaik, p. v.

⁴² This is the argument presented the argument by Neumeier in her essay quoted above.

figures of Mary, Claire, Fanny, and Harriet, are somehow inadequate, and need supplementation. As I pointed out earlier, this is literally true in the case of Mary Godwin/Shelley, as the portion of the journal that covers the conception of *Frankenstein* is missing. However the journal that covers the composition of *Frankenstein* is in existence, and so the reader might wonder why Chernaik felt the need to rewrite it. It becomes clear when the two texts are compared: Mary Shelley's actual journal is disappointingly laconic, most entries revealing nothing more inflammatory than the activities 'Write my story', 'Work', and 'Correct F.'⁴³ Thus, even the presence of the journal constitutes an absence that needs to be filled.

Mab's Daughters is thus framed as the corrective to this silence, and, as Beate Neumeier points out it also 'partakes in the current interest fostered by feminist critics and women writers alike in seeking to recover and reclaim the past on behalf of those who have been silenced and marginalized by inequality and historiography.'⁴⁴ In Chernaik's text, this process of marginalization is seen in action with Peacock's confession that, 'After Shelley's death, when Mrs Shelley was preparing his works for publication, she asked me to send her any of his writings still in my possession [...] I did not read them through; but neither did I return them. I regarded them as material held in trust for my lost friend.'⁴⁵ Although the material is made up of the women's voices, Peacock sees them as somehow belonging to Percy because he sees in them only Percy's story, and it is a story, moreover, that he would rather was not told. As the narrative unfolds we learn of Percy's infidelity, and the true consequences of his abandonment of Harriet; Peacock has appointed himself the defender of Percy's reputation. In the process of protecting Percy's story, however, he also silences the voices of the women, voices which he refuses to hear (he 'did not read them through'). In this way Peacock's activities become representative of traditional masculinist historiography: history is written in the interests of men's reputations and at the expense of the stories of women. This novel, *qua* its rediscovery of lost voices, constructs those voices as the ultimate bearers of truth (even if only a fictional truth).

As has already been suggested, the truth as revealed in *Mab's Daughters* is not straightforward. As a result of the private nature of the documents recreated by Chernaik, all four women appear primarily concerned with domestic matters: interiors

⁴³ *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, I, pp. 113-169. These are the pages of the journal that cover the composition of *Frankenstein*.

⁴⁴ Neumeier, p. 108.

⁴⁵ Chernaik, p. viii.

are described in detail, as are housekeeping arrangements. But threaded amongst these concerns are their day-to-day relations with each other, their reactions to changing circumstances which constitute the dynamic of the narrative. It opens at Diodati, Mary and Claire describing their enchanted evenings with their lovers in Switzerland; juxtaposed with these are the miserable circumstances of Fanny, left in the strict and loveless Godwin household in London, and Harriet, abandoned with her two children. The latter writes to her friend, Catherine Nugent,

Oh, my dear Mrs Nugent, my life is very different now, how changed you can hardly imagine. Mr Shelley has gone - he has left his two small children to fend for themselves...and since that time not a word has he sent me, not a single enquiry as to the health and well-being of his beautiful children, except through his solicitor Mr Whitton. Little did I suspect that a man so tender in his feelings would ever be capable of such cruel neglect.⁴⁶

In the weeks preceding the two women's respective suicides, the circumstances of Mary and Claire although admittedly difficult - attempting as they are to hide Claire's pregnancy in Bath - pale when contrasted with the increasing despair and isolation of the two abandoned satellites of the Shelley clan. It seems that even at the margins, there are those who are further marginalized. Thus the reader's sympathy for Mary and Claire is checked by their disregard of Fanny and Harriet. But this also works in the opposite direction, so that when Harriet describes how 'Mary, the younger daughter, who was educated in the wicked ideas of her mother and father regarding marriage, met Mr Shelley and determined to seduce him.'⁴⁷, we also begin to view Harriet's testimony as less than flawless.

After the deaths of Fanny and Harriet, the rest of the narrative is taken up by the difficult relations between Mary and Claire as they live through an outwardly idyllic summer at Marlow. Mary is writing *Frankenstein*, Claire is nursing Allegra, Percy writing *Laon and Cythna*, but tensions simmer, as Mary becomes increasingly uneasy at how much time Claire and Percy spend together. They are having an affair, and the differences between the two sisters are demonstrated through their understandably divergent responses: Mary is distraught, whilst Claire reflects airily,

⁴⁶ Chernaik, p. 36.

⁴⁷ Chernaik, p. 38.

'It is a pity that Mary cannot see the matter in a more philosophical light; but she must have sole and exclusive possession of her lover.'⁴⁸ This is also an intimation of the entirely different ways in which Mary views herself, and how her sister sees her. At the end of the section in which Mary has discovered the affair, we see her tormenting herself and Percy: 'I want with all my heart for him to stay, yet I cannot bring myself to say so. Nor can I bear it if he leaves me [...] How unhappy I am! What misery I am causing him!'⁴⁹ Contrasted with this emotional turmoil, is Claire observing in the chapter directly after, that following the birth of Mary's child 'Mary was reading Tacitus and correcting proofs of her novel, having recovered completely from the minor inconvenience of childbirth. She is a remarkable human being, with a will of iron.'⁵⁰ We see Claire taking for granted the fact that the surface appearance corresponds with the inner state of her sister, an assumption we can hardly blame her for, as this seems to be a situation of Mary's own making. She is revealed as being unable to express her true feelings to her husband or others around her, and this explains, to a certain extent her reputation for coldness and detachment. Chernaik here presents the reader with a microcosm of how the images of historical figures are constructed. They are made from a combination of the fictions presented to the outside world in the form of the self, and their perpetuation by those around them.

In the absence of information about the creation of *Frankenstein* apart from brief, uninformative journal entries, and the unreliable 1831 Introduction, Chernaik produces an 'explanation' for the creation of the novel, that is not dissimilar to that we have found in previous texts: the novel is the result of 'fertilisation' from an outside source. In Anne Edwards' *Haunted Summer* the source was Lord Byron, in Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* it was Joseph Bodenland, the emissary from the future, and in *Mab's Daughters*, it is, perhaps more convincingly, Percy Shelley. Chernaik also alters some historical facts so that the conception/childbirth metaphor is foregrounded more explicitly. For instance, in the 1831 Introduction we learn that after Mary had her dream, she knew all at once that, "I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others"⁵¹. In *Mab's Daughters* we learn 'I start up terrified, and Shelley awakens with me. I tell him my dream, and he says, "Why, that is your story.

⁴⁸ Chernaik, p. 209.

⁴⁹ Chernaik, p. 201.

⁵⁰ Chernaik, p. 205.

⁵¹ Shelley, p. 172.

You must write it, you shall begin tomorrow.” And so I shall.’⁵² The dates of composition are also altered slightly to nine months apart:

Today I finished my Novel. It is a most satisfying feeling to have carried a literary project from conception, through labour, to birth. [...] It was my Beloved who recognised its significance, and insisted that I bring the whole to fruition. So, in a sense the story owes its life to our intercourse - like everything else in my present existence.⁵³

Through its form and structure, *Mab's Daughters* demonstrates women's marginalized and appropriated positions in historical narrative. However, in its use of the childbirth metaphor it enacts its own process of marginalization. The story as told by Chernaik wrests agency from Mary Shelley, giving Percy credit for the conception of the story, and as we have seen, the use of the childbirth metaphor itself only aids this process in representing the creative act as something that occurs in spite of the artist. Mary describes how, ‘Today I forced myself to write, and after a few minutes of agonised blankness the sentences came one after the other. There is no going back [...] I have done all I can – the story now writes itself. I am only the scribe.’⁵⁴

Unlike Edwards' novel in which Mary Shelley identifies herself with the monster, in *Mab's Daughters* Chernaik prefers to find parallels between Victor and Mary: when she describes her dream, it occurs from her point of view, as if she were Frankenstein creating the monster. When writing the novel, she writes of the pursuit of the monster just after the death of Fanny, and there are noticeable similarities between her own guilt-ridden state of mind and Victor's: ‘My hero is in such an exalted state of guilt, remorse, and terror that he must inevitably bring his doom upon himself.’⁵⁵ She thus becomes the creator of horror, who is partially guilty for the deaths of both Fanny and Harriet, and is also guilty of withholding love from those around her. Because of Chernaik's narrative techniques she is therefore an equivocal figure, sympathetic yet culpable; tormented, yet herself tormenting.

Chernaik's text thus begins to draw attention to and destabilise the conventions and assumptions that govern both biography and fictionalised biography.

⁵² Chernaik, p. 10.

⁵³ Chernaik, pp. 148-9.

⁵⁴ Chernaik, p. 93.

⁵⁵ Chernaik, p. 93.

This process comes to a head in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992). In Gray's hands assumptions about the depiction of historical figures in fictional texts disintegrate almost completely: the text displays its own artificiality at every turn, and is so deeply self-conscious it has been described as a 'post-postmodern' text.⁵⁶ Because of this, it contains nothing as straightforward as a fictional portrait of Mary Shelley, or indeed of any of the figures associated with her. She is, rather, along with her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, a symbolic presence in the background of *Poor Things*. Because Gray's text does not follow the biographical route we have by now become familiar with, it will need more extensive description than I have provided of the fictional texts so far. The main part of the text is taken up with *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer*, published by its author, Archibald McCandless, in an edition of one in 1909. It tells the story of McCandless's friendship with a talented doctor at Glasgow University, named Godwin Byshe Baxter, whose physical peculiarities are such that he can only work at the University as a research assistant, his appearance frightening patients, and offending colleagues. Rumours abound about the dark and mysterious nature of his research, and Baxter is an equally mysterious and reserved character. However, he eventually trusts McCandless enough to invite him to his home. McCandless soon learns that the new arrival in Baxter's household, Bella, is in fact the result of one of Baxter's experiments: he has revived the body of a drowned woman (she threw herself into the Clyde) using the brain of the foetus with which she was pregnant.

The *Episodes* go on to record their lives together: how McCandless eventually becomes engaged to Bella, and how she elopes with the villainous lawyer Duncan Wedderburn. We learn of Duncan and Bella's travels around Europe from their letters which have been incorporated by McCandless into his narrative, and of how Wedderburn is driven to the edge of sanity by Bella's raging sexual appetite which he can accommodate neither mentally nor physically. Left alone much of the time, the sociable Bella meets an American missionary, Dr Hooker, and Harry Astley, an English businessman, who conveniently for Bella's education, possess opposing world views. Hooker represents the hypocrisy of Victorian evangelicism, which believes, as he explains to Bella:

⁵⁶ Fred Botting, 'Poor Things As They Are: The "post-postmodernism" of Alasdair Gray's Gothicism', paper given at 'The Persistence of Gothic' conference, Greenwich University, 12 October 2002.

We [the Anglo-Saxon race] should not feel proud of our superior virtues. God arranged it by giving us bigger brains than anyone else, so we find it easier to control our evil animal instincts. This means that compared with the Chinese, Hindoos, Negroes and Amerindians [...] we are like teachers in a playground of children who do not want to know that the school exists.⁵⁷

Astley, on the other hand, freely admits the economic basis that underpins colonialism, and will have none of Hooker's cant. Bella is caught between Hooker's apparent good intentions and Astley's realism, but when Hooker takes her to see the beggars of Alexandria displayed as sport for tourists, she realises his hypocrisy. Her letter to Baxter (from which we hear of this incident) disintegrates into an inarticulate, tearstained mess of words on the page. The sight that has caused her breakdown is that of 'a thin little girl blind in one eye carrying a baby with a big head who was blind in both she held it tight in one arm held the other straight out swaying the empty clutching hand from side to side mechanically as if in a trance'.⁵⁸ Bella tries to adopt the girl, whom she strongly identifies with because of her own lost baby (which she has learnt about prior to this incident). She is horrified at the words bellowed at her by Hooker: 'YOU CAN DO NO GOOD' which both Hooker and Astley believe, but for different reasons. Hooker, because this is simply the natural order of things, and that the girl is no better than an animal; Astley, conversely because this is the way the world works and single acts by individuals are ineffectual in the face of the economic system.

This is figured as the central moment of Bella's education. After Astley has patiently enumerated all the evils of the world - poverty, oppression etc. - and the inadequacy of solutions such as socialism and communism, he suggests that the only solution is for Bella to marry him. 'My country estate has a farm on it and a whole village - think of the power you will have. Besides caring for my children (who we will not send to public schools) you can bully me into improving the drains and lowering the rents of the whole community.'⁵⁹ But Bella astutely realises that, in his own way, Astley too is weak: 'I felt for the first time who he really is - a tortured little

⁵⁷ Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* ([1992] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 139.

⁵⁸ Gray, pp. 173-4.

⁵⁹ Gray, p. 163.

boy who hates cruelty as much as I do but thinks himself a strong man because he can pretend to like it. He is as poor and desperate as my lost daughter, but only inside.’⁶⁰

Bella returns to Glasgow (and McCandless and Baxter) a convinced socialist and committed to change. Before she can begin, however, she is tracked down by her ‘original’ father and husband. It transpires that the body in which her brain was placed in fact belonged to Victoria Blessington, daughter to Blaydon Hattersley, head of the ‘Union Jack Steam Traction Company of Manchester and Birmingham’ and wife to General Blessington. Having interrupted Bella and McCandless’s wedding, they are eventually persuaded to leave Bella/Victoria in peace. Bella and Archie finally marry, Baxter dies, and the *Episodes* end.

However, this is followed by a letter written by Victoria McCandless to her descendants in which she gives her version of the events. Far from having been ‘re-created’ by Godwin Baxter, she was simply revived metaphorically by him having run away from her intolerable home life with General Blessington. She is sent to medical school by Baxter and becomes a renowned obstetrician and socialist, battling for the health of the working people. In contrast to McCandless’s depiction of himself as the bright and hardworking disciple of Godwin Baxter, he comes across in his wife’s account as an incompetent and pitiable buffoon, her true (and unrequited) love being for Baxter himself. Having informed the reader of the true circumstances of her life, she addresses us directly:

You, dear reader, have now two accounts to choose between and there can be no doubt which is most probable. My second husband’s story positively stinks of all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries, the nineteenth. He has made a sufficiently strange story stranger still by stirring into it episodes and phrases to be found in Hogg’s *Suicide’s Grave* with additional ghouleries from the works of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe. What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from?⁶¹

Both this letter and the *Episodes* are presented to us by their ‘editor’ Alasdair Gray, who explains in a preface how he came across the documents, and in detailed endnotes (a common Gray practice) proving the ‘truth’ of the *Episodes*. In these extensive notes, we learn through Gray’s quotation of newspaper reports and other contemporary documents that Victoria McCandless seems to have been regarded as

⁶⁰ Gray, p. 164.

⁶¹ Gray, pp. 272-3.

something of a harmless crank, obsessed with birth-control and cuddling children: “Dr Vic’s latest pamphlet [...] is an insane blend of ideas culled from Malthus, D. H. Lawrence and Marie Stopes. She blames herself for the Great War because she bore too many sons and did not *cuddle* them enough.”⁶² Later, however, Gray shows himself to agree with a polemicist who believes she should have been given an academic post at Glasgow University.

In his preface Gray has given an account of his dispute with the local historian, Michael Donnelly, who had originally found the documents. Donnelly believed them to be a fiction, but Gray, their editor, presents himself as the champion of history: ‘I think it like Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*; a loving portrait of an astonishingly good, stout, intelligent, eccentric man recorded by a friend with a memory for dialogue.’⁶³ He eventually shows, through his notes, that as ‘editor’ he believes both Archie and Victoria McCandless’s version of events. Thus the reader finds him or herself in a bizarre netherworld of fictional history, where so many real historical figures (George Bernard Shaw, Beatrice Webb, Hugh MacDiarmid) attest to the reality of clearly invented characters, they are unable to know who or what to believe. The solution is, of course, to believe everything and nothing.

The variety of viewpoints (including her own) from which Bella Baxter/Victoria McCandless is presented, and the uncertainty this produces as to where the centre of the text is from which the reader may gain a comfortable vantage point of the whole, can be seen as emblematic of the nature of history and biography. In presenting this in the context of a fiction, we are invited to believe that these apparently factual projects can be nothing more than the artificially created offspring of the fevered imaginations of the participants. Thus we must believe nothing. However, *Poor Things* is not just a flippant concatenation of by now familiar postmodern tropes and devices (the fake editor; the mutually contradictory texts; the false claim to ‘truth’) but an exploration of the themes of artistic and scientific creation, parenthood, and social conditioning and how all these interact. Thus, we must pay close attention to the details of Gray’s text and believe everything.

Although Victoria dismisses *Frankenstein* as simply one amongst many intertexts that Archie has ‘filched from’ in his creation of the *Episodes*, in fact both Mary Shelley’s life and text dominate *Poor Things* as allusive keystones. To begin

⁶² Gray, p. 308 (Gray’s emphasis).

⁶³ Gray, p. xiii.

with, one of the central motifs of *Poor Things* is also the central moment of *Frankenstein*: the artificial creation of a human being. The figure of Victoria Blessington (whose Christian name is both that of the monarch of the age, and the female version of Victor, Frankenstein's first name) who threw herself into the Clyde and is rescued by Godwin Baxter, contains echoes of the life of Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft once threw herself off Putney Bridge into the Thames, and is viewed by her biographers as having been emotionally rescued by William Godwin. Godwin Bysshe Baxter obviously represents the densest nexus of allusions: he is Victor Frankenstein's mirror image, and his three names evoke the names of the three father-figures of Mary Shelley.

The combination of Mary Shelley's life and work in this novel produces a reading of *Frankenstein* as a fable of parenthood, one of the central questions of Gray's text being 'How are we made?', and the answer provided by Gray proves far more optimistic than the one found in *Frankenstein*. Baxter is the mirror image of Frankenstein in several ways: he creates a female, not a male; he lavishes her with love and attention, rather than neglect; his pursuit of science is as a medical doctor and thus his whole aim is to help others, rather than Victor Frankenstein's vain vision of himself as the creator of a new race. Frankenstein's much quoted desire to 'penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places'⁶⁴ can be contrasted with Baxter's views on nature. He reflects that, 'Only folk whose heads are muddled by expensive educations think truth, beauty, goodness are rare private properties. Nature is more liberal. The universe keeps nothing essential from us - it is all present, all gift.'⁶⁵ Thus Baxter, and indeed the text of *Poor Things* as a whole, can be seen as a deliberately inverted reimagining of Victor Frankenstein and Shelley's novel. Where *Frankenstein* is pervaded by oppositions between art and science; between rationalism and emotion; between public and private, dichotomies which eventually cause the downfall of the hero, in Gray's text they become fused. Baxter explains the folly of studying morbid anatomy in the treatment of live humans through an artistic metaphor: "[...] a portrait painter does not learn his art by scraping layers of a varnish from a Rembrandt, then slicing off the impasto, dissolving the

⁶⁴ Shelley, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Gray, p. 100.

ground and finally separating the fibres of the canvas.” He later gives his own father, also an eminent doctor, the highest accolade ““He was a true artist””⁶⁶

Gray also inverts conventions which we have seen being used in earlier depictions of the life of Mary Shelley: as Botting points out, despite its complex network of Gothic references, (the use of the ‘fake editor’ is a Gothic, as well as a postmodern device) *Poor Things* is decidedly un-Gothic in atmosphere and ultimate effect. He explains:

Its ghosts are all too visible as no more than the fictional forebears it wears for all to see; its immersion in a Scottish Gothic tradition, while acknowledging a thoroughgoing cultural ‘gothicisation’, eschews the lamentation, gloom and haunting central to its mood; its one moment of true, devastating horror stands opposed to any masquerade of superstitious fantasy or unconscious demonism. Paying its Gothic dues in full with one hand, *Poor Things* discards renounces/disclaims any membership of the club with the other.⁶⁷

Thus, where many texts discussed in this chapter situate their fictional figure of Mary Shelley firmly in a Gothic context, thereby puncturing any claim to be the ‘true’ story behind the silence, Gray’s text evades the Gothic consequences of eliding Mary Shelley’s life with her work, by making his text too connected to social and political realities to participate in the supernatural fantasy necessary to most Gothic texts. In fact, rather than a freakish outcast, or sinister devil-woman, Baxter’s creation, Victoria McCandless (and therefore Mary Shelley’s proxy in the novel) is seen at worst as a misguided eccentric, at best as a ‘practical, busy-in-the-world mother.’⁶⁸ She is only called a monster (and in terms that closely echo the epithets directed at the monster in Shelley’s novel - ‘Fiend! Demon woman!’⁶⁹) by Duncan Wedderburn, whose clear insanity disqualifies him from being taken seriously. Unlike the monster in Shelley’s novel who submits to his own construction as a monster (believing his own bad press, if you like), Bella, in contrast, resists the ways in which those around her attempt to construct her. She resists too, the pessimistic vision of society presented in both *Frankenstein* and Astley and Hooker’s world-views, retaining to the end of her days her faith in the ‘International Socialist Movement’.

⁶⁶ Gray, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Botting, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Gray, p. 252.

⁶⁹ Gray, p. 170.

Thus the framework for the representation of Mary Shelley's life that has been gradually built over the decades since the first biographies of her appeared, is collapsed and disintegrated by Gray. Her life, rather than representing itself (she does not appear as herself in this novel) becomes an allusive frame in the background, quietly feeding the main themes of the text. Her historical position as the daughter of two writers deeply engaged in social and political issues of their day, is combined with the story of her own novel of artificial creation to make her the result of a deliberate piece of social engineering. Moreover, her status as a *writer* who is the issue of other writers foregrounds the text's own concern with textuality, and with the artifice of textuality. This concern reflects back onto its themes so that the artificiality of other categories usually regarded as 'natural' is highlighted. Categories such as parenthood: in *Poor Things* none of the characters is reared in a conventional household. Archie McCandless is raised by his mother, but educated and 'fathered' by Godwin Baxter, as is Bella/Victoria, originally the daughter of a tyrannical father and weak mother (another echo of the life of Mary Wollstonecraft). Baxter himself is the illegitimate son of Sir Colin Baxter, eminent doctor, and whose mother is an unknown domestic servant. The artificially created Bella Baxter is raised by Godwin Bysshe Baxter, reminding us of Mary Shelley's education at the hands not just of her own biological father, but the Baxter family in Dundee with whom she lived for several years, and Percy Shelley, regarded by some critics as the spark that fired her imagination. Gray continually reminds us of the artificial creation of humans: chapters about the formative experiences of the main characters are headed, 'Making Me', 'Making Godwin Baxter', 'Making Bella Baxter' 'Making a Maniac'. Thus, the artificiality of what is usually regarded as natural is foregrounded. People become like texts, created by their *context*, in the same way that the recorded life of a person is simply a concatenation of written documents. Any representation of that life is simply constituted by a patchwork of texts sewn together in various combinations. Where previous texts may have deployed a metaphor of childbirth to render the artistic act of creation as something unwilled, unconscious, and ultimately *natural*, this simply is not possible in Gray's text which demonstrates the creation of both life and text as far more complex than this naïve metaphor implies.

Last in this chronological sequence of texts in which Mary Shelley figures as a main character, is Walter Jon Williams' short story, 'Wall, Stone, Craft' (1993). Although

it is described as science fiction, and was originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction*, Williams' story owes more to the emotional realism of *Mab's Daughters* than the fantastic events of *Frankenstein Unbound*. The editorial introduction tells us that Williams has imagined an 'alternate history' in which Byron is a famous soldier instead of a poet, 'but finds that his most significant encounter is yet to be fought, a life-and-death contest of clashing wills and conflicting ideals waged against a frail but determined young woman named Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley who has greatness inside her, waiting to be born.'⁷⁰ This ostensibly refers to the fact that she is pregnant throughout the story, but also to the story of *Frankenstein* which is burgeoning in her mind. The story is divided into two parts, covering two meetings between the Shelleys and Byron, the first taking place just after the battle of Waterloo, and at the time of Mary and Percy's elopement. The second a few years later when Mary and Percy are married and she is pregnant again, and Claire has had her child by Byron. After finally agreeing to provide financially for Allegra, Byron asks Percy for the use of his boat *Ariel* to effect the escape of a noblewoman he is protecting from the pursuit of an evil seducer. He claims her husband can't help her because he is 'abroad'. Bysshe (as he is called in the story) immediately falls for the romance of his plan and agrees to help him. Mary is angry at his recklessness, and insists that she come with him because that way "you'll take fewer chances with me aboard"⁷¹. Claire also goes with them, and once ashore they arrive at an inn where they are eventually surrounded by the noblewoman's pursuers. By now Mary has guessed her to be the wife of Napoleon. She berates Byron that he is "fighting Napoleon even now! Even when the battlefield is only a bed!"⁷² Mary has begun to miscarry, and they are now trapped. The enemy refuse to send in either surgeon or life-saving ice: "They suspect a plot, I suppose," George reported. [...] "Or they think one of my men is wounded." to which Mary responds,

'They want to make you watch someone die,' Mary said.
'And hope it will make you surrender.' George looked at her. 'Yes, you comprehend their intent,' he said. 'That is precisely what they want.' Bysshe looked horrified.

⁷⁰ Walter Jon Williams, 'Wall, Stone, Craft' in *The Best New Science Fiction*, ed. by Gardner Dozois (London: Robinson, 1994), pp. 584-650 (p. 584) (First publ. in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction*, October 1993).

⁷¹ Walter Jon Williams, p. 627.

⁷² Walter Jon Williams, p. 635.

George's look turned intent. 'And what does Mistress Mary want?'

Mary closed her eyes. 'Mistress Mary wants to live, and to hell with you all.'

George laughed, a low and misanthropic chuckle. 'Very well. Live you shall - and I believe I know the way.'⁷³

So Byron agrees to fight a duel on horseback with his rival, which he wins, but he falls from his horse and crushes his leg. Ice is procured for Mary, and the story ends with her telling them all a story to keep their minds off their circumstances, as Byron nurses his leg and she sits in the tub of ice. 'It was about an empty man, a Swiss baron who was a genius but who lacked any quality of soul. His name, in English, meant the Franked Stone - the stone whose noble birth had paid its way, but which was still a stone, and being a stone unable to know love.'⁷⁴

Once again, Byron is the inspiration for the story of *Frankenstein*, his cruel treatment of Claire and his refusal to accept responsibility for his daughter eliciting Mary's judgement: "Unnatural man! [...] Can't you acknowledge the consequences of your own behaviour?"⁷⁵ It is curious that although twenty years after Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound*, writers of science fiction are still being drawn to the story behind Shelley's story (Tim Powers' *The Stress of Her Regard* (1989), discussed below, is another example), the interpretation made of that story has changed in quite notable ways. Where Aldiss's reading of *Frankenstein* is as a scientific fable, and therefore all of a piece with the genre in which he is writing, Williams' reading is perhaps more unexpected for a science fiction writer. To shape his story he concentrates on the emotional arguments presented by both the novel and Mary Shelley's life, rather than the intellectual ones pursued by Aldiss. The creation of the monster is not the first example of the robot, or a primitive species of AI, but is rather inspired by Byron's physical deformity, his outward monstrosity, displaying the monstrosity of the soul within (as Edwards portrays him in *Haunted Summer*).

Although physically subjected by the circumstances of her miscarriage, Mary Shelley is shown in 'Wall, Stone, Craft' to be a powerful figure, in possession of knowledge none of the others have, unlike *Frankenstein Unbound*, in which she is unaware of the outcome of her life, of Frankenstein's activities, and barely even conscious of the creation of her own novel. Thus in the more conventional readings

⁷³ Walter Jon Williams, p. 642.

⁷⁴ Walter Jon Williams, p. 648.

⁷⁵ Walter Jon Williams, p. 624.

of her life (the ones which do not concern themselves with breaking down those fictional conventions), the figure of Mary Shelley is gradually changing from one subjected and overshadowed by her own text, to one with full control over its production. This is shown even in the disappearance of the childbirth metaphor in expressing the events surrounding the composition of *Frankenstein*. Although it is invoked in the introductory blurb to Williams' story, the reader finds that it is not actually present in the story itself: at no point does Williams appear to make the link between Mary's physical pregnancy and her artistic creativity.

CAMEO APPEARANCES

The novels in this section are those in which the central character is either one of the Romantics other than Mary Shelley, or an entirely fictional character. It is perhaps unsurprising that in these stories she appears as somewhat one-dimensional. What that dimension is, is largely determined by the kind of fiction in which she appears, and who its central characters are: thus in Miranda Seymour's Gothic/romantic rewriting of Byron's life, Mary Shelley is correspondingly macabre; in Paul West's *Lord Byron's Doctor* (1989) narrated by the tormented Polidori, she is a cool yet kind ally to the Doctor; in Tim Powers' fantastic rewriting of the 1816 summer at Diodati, she is simply a scribe who writes down everything that happens as *Frankenstein*; whilst in Federico Andahazi's *The Merciful Women* (1998), a similarly fevered imagining of the 'true' events that took place on Lake Geneva, she is a signifier of sexual licence. At first glance, Theodore Roszak's *Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995) would appear not to belong in this survey as it is a rewriting of *Frankenstein* itself and does not contain Mary Shelley as a character at all. However, it is discussed here because of Roszak's own introduction in which he claims first, that Elizabeth Frankenstein is the true voice of Mary Shelley, and that what follows is the story she 'really' wanted to tell, but could not because of the oppressive conventions of her time.

The story of Miranda Seymour's *Count Manfred* is told from the point of view of the fictional character, Lucy Emerton, whose uncle and guardian's estate neighbours Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire, and which Lord Byron leases to the unpleasant Lord Ruthven. Lucy's feckless brother Harry offers his sister's hand in marriage to

Ruthven as a stake at cards, and Ruthven promptly wins it. With his impeccable dress-sense, 'violet-lidded eyes', and hints that he has lived for an unnaturally long time, Ruthven is the stock aristocratic vampire first imagined by Polidori in 'The Vampyre' (and who is Ruthven's namesake). It transpires that Byron is locked into a diabolical relationship with Ruthven, and is also in love with Lucy. Ruthven marries Lucy, not only to claim his prize, but also in order to spite Byron who he is obsessed with destroying. Both Lucy and Byron are haunted and tormented by Ruthven throughout the novel, Lucy only gaining her freedom from him at Byron's death.

On her first escape to London from the dastardly Ruthven, she meets the Shelleys who are immediately cast in a macabre and unsympathetic light because of their fascination with Ruthven's evil activities (which include conducting 'a galvanic experiment before a selected audience.'⁷⁶). When Mary realises who Lucy is she is immediately excited: "He's been the inspiration of all our Gothic tales and imaginings, hasn't he [...]"⁷⁷. Thoughtless of the pain Ruthven might have caused Lucy, she demands to know all about him. Both Percy and Claire are also excited by her connection with Byron and hope Lucy will be their means of an introduction: thus viewed through the eyes of the heroine, the Shelleys come across as insensitive and exploitative.

As with most of the texts discussed in this chapter, the appearance of Mary Shelley is also a cue for an explanation of *Frankenstein*. Having told Lucy earlier that she has the name of her novel, but no ideas for a plot, the inspiration comes as a result of the combination of the death of one of her babies and one of Ruthven's galvanic experiments. Seymour, who has recently written one of the most critically acclaimed biographies of Mary Shelley, said of *her* novel:

Richard Holmes's enthralling life of the poet had just been published; there, I encountered Mary as a sulky, bad-tempered young woman, a nagging wife [...] If Mary spent her widowhood struggling to promote her husband's reputation and to elevate him to the status of a saint, she was no doubt compensating for having failed him during his life. This, I am embarrassed to remember, was how I presented Mary in my novel.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Miranda Seymour, *Count Manfred* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 142. Here after, *Count Manfred*.

⁷⁷ *Count Manfred*, p. 141.

⁷⁸ Seymour, p. xiii.

Certainly the portrait in the novel is not a positive one (but as we have seen it does not favour Percy or Claire either), and the explanation for *Frankenstein*, as well as being unrealistic (what novelist thinks of the title of their work before anything else?), is commonplace. However, it is all of a piece with the atmosphere Seymour wishes to create in her novel, and contributes above all else to the reader's sympathy for its heroine, Lucy Emerton, whose only ally it appears, is Byron himself.

Byron is a far less sympathetic character in Paul West's *Lord Byron's Doctor*, in which he is the persecutor here, and Polidori the victim who engages the reader's sympathy. Mary Shelley is thus cast in the role of one of his only allies. Polidori has been commissioned for £500 by John Murray, Byron's publishers, to write a diary of his trip to Europe with Byron. However, he is so overwhelmed by Byron's personality that he wants to be his employer, rather than simply document his conversations and activities:

I should have been writing more of it down for my diary, to earn my five hundred guineas. I should have been less fascinated by his presence, by his gleaming and arrogant effrontery; but I gaped away, very much the junior, in truth having too good (and bad) a time to be the correct amanuensis. [...] How swayed I was, how smitten, like Judas Iscariot playing bezique with God. I noted down landscapes and townscapes, but the hot lava of his chit-chat swam away from me.⁷⁹

Thus, when the Shelleys arrive on the scene Polidori is initially threatened by them, feeling he 'had been deposed to number four or five in milord's roster of interests, now truly made back into a Polly-woddle or worse. [...] We now had three extra persons for me to be serf to. It was too much to bear.'⁸⁰

Although he never takes to Percy, he and the women soon make uneasy allies in their status as the marginalized and rejected appendages of the great intellectuals. He eventually has an affair with Claire but is also fascinated by the cool Mary. In conversation with the doctor she understandably reveals the more scientific side of her interests, and thus comes across not only as cool, but as a masculine kind of intellectual. Polidori gives her various ideas that will help her eventually: first giving

⁷⁹ West, p. 19.

⁸⁰ West, pp. 52 & 3.

her an amusing formula for converting a romance into a Gothic novel, the last item of which is “[...] young doctors become insane scientific experimenters, bringing corpses back to life.”⁸¹ She does not know how her monster will be brought to life, and Polidori helpfully suggests electricity; and when after telling him much of her story but declaring that ‘much of it is still in my mind and may remain there, safely’”, he advises “‘Then let it out [...] set it free.’”⁸² In the context of the novel as a whole the idea that Polidori gave Mary Shelley many of the ideas that helped her write her most famous novel is not unambiguously presented. Polidori is a vain man, and one who declares himself to be an unreliable and forgetful witness. Thus these moments of inspiration could easily have been imagined or invented by West’s Polidori.

The most interesting aspect of *Lord Byron's Doctor*, however, is the reading made of *Frankenstein*. In drawing a parallel between Polidori and Frankenstein (as occurs in his description of doctors in Gothic novels above), West also makes Shelley’s novel a parable about biography. As paid keeper of a diary, Polidori, as Byron never tires of pointing out, is also a biographer. As someone with little literary talent he soon abandons the project. However, he does not forget it completely, and simply reconfigures it in the terms of the occupation for which he is blessed with some ability: medicine. Biography becomes anatomy, and thoroughly Frankensteinian anatomy at that: ‘[Byron] mocked me, of course, but I vengefully metamorphosed him [...] in some greenhouse atop an Alp, cutting him open with nursery deftness, and connecting up his blood vessels in a wrong way that nonetheless worked. He would wolf his food through his rear, vent it from his mouth, make water through his nose, and have a heart beating in his grossly magnified foot.’⁸³ Indeed the trope of artificial or fragmenting bodies is one that permeates *Lord Byron's Doctor*, so that even though Mary Shelley may only be a minor figure in the text, through the doctor’s obsessions, her novel itself becomes a ghostly presence in the text. And when Polidori is asked by Percy to examine Mary, he jumps at the chance: ‘I was at last able to peel open his May [*sic*], shining my miner’s lamp into her golden tunnel with barely suppressed exclamations of delight. I knew enough of her writing by now

⁸¹ West, p. 58.

⁸² West, p. 93.

⁸³ West, p. 38.

to think I had actually peered into the abyss of Victor Frankenstein, and all by way of duty.’⁸⁴

Like Seymour’s *Count Manfred*, the central character of Tim Powers’ *The Stress of Her Regard* (1989), Dr Michael Crawford, is fictional. When he wakes up on the first morning of his honeymoon next to the grotesquely mutilated corpse of his new wife, he is the prime suspect. He escapes to London, assumes a new identity (‘Michael Frankish’), continues his medical work and meets the medical student, John Keats. Through the knowledgeable Keats Crawford learns that his wife was killed by a savage demon called a ‘neff’ (short for nephilim) or ‘lamia’, and that he has become host to one of these overwhelmingly jealous supernatural creatures. Keats has been trying to summon one himself as an inspirational aid to his hobby of poetry. He advises Crawford to head for the Alps where the neff like to congregate, thus taking his unwelcome demon back where it belongs. This is how he meets Byron and the Shelleys. Shelley too is a host to a lamia, and is the explanation for all the supernatural events that have dogged him throughout his life (the giant tortoise in the pond at his home in Sussex; his ‘visitation’ and the shooting incident at Tanyrallt in Wales; his various visions and nightmares). In fact, it is this that provides the inspiration for the ghost-story competition, and ultimately *Frankenstein* itself.

The first description of its author as ‘the sensible Mary Godwin’⁸⁵ serves to define her role throughout the text, obviating the need to fill out the character with her own will or autonomy. ‘Sensible’ in this context becomes shorthand for ‘unimaginative’: after her nightmare, Percy

[...] encouraged her to write it out, and to freely use incidents from his own life to amplify it. She’d taken him at his word, and the story had become almost a biography of Shelley, and a chronicling of his fear of being pursued by some kind of double of himself, a sort of dreaded twin that was destined to kill everyone he loved.

Shelley had even suggested the name of the protagonist, a German word meaning something like *the stone whose travel-toll is paid in advance*. She had wanted to use a more English-sounding name, but it had seemed important

⁸⁴ West, p. 146. Mary was often affectionately called ‘May’ or ‘the Maie’ by Percy.

⁸⁵ Tim Powers, *The Stress of Her Regard* ([1989] London: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 11.

to Shelley, and so she had obediently called the protagonist Frankenstein.⁸⁶

The Stress of Her Regard is a novel in which the female characters are sexually voracious monsters, or ideal wives, or if neither of these (as in the case of the twin sister of Michael's late wife) then sinister automata. A Mary Shelley with creative imagination would not fit in this context, so becomes Percy Shelley's secretary, 'obediently' taking down dictation.

As those who seek to recreate the increasingly threadbare-looking scene of Diodati find themselves having to look for increasingly arresting ways of presenting it, the figure of Mary Shelley slips further into the background. She and her fellow Romantics barely exist in Federico Andahazi's *The Merciful Women* (1998) in which her most memorable appearance is at the beginning when all the residents of Diodati and Chappuis arrive at Diodati in a downpour. Soaking wet, they all unselfconsciously strip and, 'Mary Shelley, exhausted but happy, lay back in the armchair and, taking her husband's hand, pulled him towards her until he fell on top of her, and then wrapped her legs around his back.'⁸⁷ Meanwhile, Polidori, '[f]aced with the debauched tableau, [...] made a grimace of puritanical distaste.'⁸⁸ *The Merciful Women* is devoted to a fictional account of how Polidori came by his story of 'The Vampyre'. As with many of the other fictions discussed here, the narrator of *The Merciful Women* claims to have found documents hitherto thought lost or destroyed that clear up the 'events which have remained unknown until this day, concerning the life of Dr Polidori, the shadowy author of *The Vampyre*'⁸⁹ Once again we are in the presence of a narrator who styles himself the editor of found documents, but documents which are, in true Gothic tradition, themselves of doubtful provenance and questionable legibility:

Though I cannot swear that these papers were apocryphal,
nor can I affirm that they were not, because to tell the truth,
I never even had the opportunity to hold them in my hands.

⁸⁶ Powers, p. 158.

⁸⁷ Federico Andahazi, *The Merciful Women*, trans. by Alberto Manguel ([1998] London: Doubleday, 2000), p. 21.

⁸⁸ Andahazi, p. 22. There was once a time in earlier biographies and fictions (for example, in Maurois' *Ariel*) when it would have been Mary Shelley herself making that puritanical grimace.

⁸⁹ Andahazi, pp. 14-15.

During our meeting in the old house, I saw none of the original documents. Our host (whose identity I will not reveal) partly read out loud and partly glossed over the contents of numerous folders, consisting of practically illegible photocopies.[...] Since we were not allowed to keep any material proof of these documents - neither a copy nor even a note - what follows is not a literal recollection but a laborious literary reconstruction of what we heard.⁹⁰

By destabilising the authority of the text in this way, Andahazi's novel is not only conforming to Gothic conventions but postmodern ones too. The explanation given of the origins of *The Vampyre* (and, as becomes apparent towards the end of the novel, *Frankenstein*) are so outlandish that they challenge the reader's suspension of disbelief, until the final pages when the ultimate confirmation of their 'truth' is revealed.

Through a combination of third-person narration, letters, and diary-entries we learn of the diabolical story behind the creation of some of the most famous Romantic/Gothic texts of the late-eighteenth, and early-nineteenth centuries. Staying at Diodati, Polidori receives a 'black envelope stamped on the back with an enormous red seal; in its centre was a baroque letter L'.⁹¹ It is from a woman named Annette Legrand claiming the ability to bestow Polidori's heart's desire (literary immortality) in exchange for his semen. She is not, however, simply a literary genius with a peculiar sexual fetish, but (as it turns out from further letters) a human monster, that medical rarity, a teratoma. She was born (on a dark and stormy night), Siamese-fashion, between her twin sisters, and once separated they are symbiotically linked: if one dies, they all die, and the substance they need to stay alive is human semen. As a child, Annette's father, horrified by her monstrous appearance (especially when contrasted with the beauty of her sisters), banishes her to the basement of his house, which contains a huge library (which, in a Borgesian twist, seems to contain every single book ever written and published). Having read all the books and stored them in her prodigious memory, she follows the example of the rats around her, and eats them. This is the source of her literary talent. Thus, *The Merciful Women*, like *Poor Things*, and many other postmodern texts (even *Frankenstein* itself), can be said to be about textuality itself, about the relationships between texts, and their patchworked

⁹⁰ Andahazi, p. 19.

⁹¹ Andahazi, p. 25.

nature. However, the logical conclusion of this theme is that no author can lay authentic claim to the ownership of their text, and in this context, Mary Shelley, once again, is not the true author of *Frankenstein*. In a twist on the childbirth metaphor deployed in many texts discussed so far, Polidori finds a chest in Annette Legrand's room filled with letters of grateful thanks from some of the greatest authors of the age: Chateaubriand, Byron, and Pushkin. She has been responsible for all of their works, and Polidori becomes insane with jealousy. The letter he finds at the bottom of the trunk, however, sends him over the edge:

It carried the signature of Mary Shelley. Reading the first paragraph, he blanched. He had witnessed and taken part in all sorts of horrible events, but he had never read anything so bleak or so hellish. John Polidori was unable to go on [...] He fainted.

Never again would John Polidori recover his reason, until the day of his premature death.⁹²

Frankenstein becomes the product of a bizarre sexual pact, which chimes perfectly with the brief appearance made by Mary Shelley at the beginning of the novel. Once again, the figure of Mary Shelley finds herself embroiled in a discussion of sexuality and textuality. As with many of her brief appearances, she does not represent herself but becomes a signifier, in this case, for the liberated sexual mores of the late Romantics, especially when contrasted with Polidori's humourless prudery. And if the reader has found herself doubting the contents of Andahazi's novel, prompted by the narrator's own scepticism at the story he tells, then like the listener of a supernatural tale who sees a real shadow looming over the shoulder of the teller, we hear in the final paragraph how the narrator has just found on his desk a 'black envelope, sealed with red wax, and in whose centre one can make out an almost illegible letter L'⁹³

There are more literary games being played in the final text to be discussed in this chapter, Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995). As I pointed out earlier, this is a rewriting of *Frankenstein* rather than one of Mary Shelley's life, but since Roszak claims that Elizabeth is Mary's literary alter ego, it is

⁹² Andahazi, p. 185.

⁹³ Andahazi, pp. 187-88.

worth briefly pursuing the implications of Roszak's novel. In the same way that other authors have claimed access to the true story behind the creation of *Frankenstein*, Roszak too claims to be privy to an untold story. However, his story is the story of *Frankenstein* itself: 'I have long felt that the *Frankenstein* Mary most wanted to offer the world lies hidden in an under-story that only Elizabeth could have written.'⁹⁴ This story concerns itself with the alchemical origins of Frankenstein's studies, influenced by Elizabeth and her involvement with a group of paganistic women. This is framed in what is by now a familiar manner: Elizabeth's memoirs consist of her reminiscences interspersed with transcriptions of letters, the whole of which is edited by Robert Walton, the original narrator of *Frankenstein*. He has now become Sir Robert Walton, F.R.S., O.B.E., and a pillar of the Victorian establishment. He tells us he knows some of Elizabeth's story from Victor, but was so horrified that he chose to excise the material from his original account, attributing it to Victor's fevered state of mind. On reading Elizabeth's manuscript he finds her account difficult to credit:

I could never have guessed that I should discover this seemingly guileless young woman dabbling in rites that our Christian forefathers assumed were long since purged from memory. Nor could I have imagined her voluntarily delving into the erotic practices that constitute the dark side of alchemical philosophy [...] Was it possible, as certain passages in this text suggest, that Elizabeth, far from being a reluctant participant in her lover's unnatural pursuits, was to some degree their initiator?⁹⁵

He thus establishes his moral rectitude, which he attempts to reinforce in the justification of the publication of these memoirs: 'My steadfast allegiance to the ideal of scientific objectivity. This alone, the cherished habit of a life-time spent in the service of truth, strengthened me in an endeavour that moral revulsion might have persuaded me to abandon.'⁹⁶

Thus Walton signals his own prurience, only reinforced by his appearance as editor to make moral interjections from time to time. This serves to strengthen the reader's sympathy/identification with Elizabeth Frankenstein, and via her with Mary Shelley herself. There are also several parallels established between the two over the course of Roszak's novel: as well as Roszak's own assertion of their identification,

⁹⁴ Theodore Roszak, *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. ix.

⁹⁵ Roszak, p. xvii.

⁹⁶ Roszak, p. xviii.

we learn of Elizabeth's early life, and that her mother, like Mary Wollstonecraft, died in childbirth. The date of Elizabeth's death at the hands of the monster, and the point in time from which she views her life in the *Memoirs*, is 30 August 1797, Mary Shelley's birth-date. The implication of this is that Mary is somehow a reincarnation of Elizabeth: risen from the grave so that she can tell the murdered woman's story. Meanwhile Walton's editorial interjections evoke the contemporary critical context of *Frankenstein*. In these he comments on particular portions of the text, reflecting on the authenticity or otherwise of the claims made in it. After one particularly fevered piece of reminiscence from Elizabeth, in which she lives feral in a forest and kills a man, Walton is troubled: 'By no stretch of the imagination is it possible to credit all that she reports.'⁹⁷ He goes on to assert that there is no possibility that the murder she described could have taken place:

A young woman slight of build, untrained in the use of weapons, and of the greatest gentility possesses neither the physical nor the emotional resources to carry out so vicious an act. The very fact that she could invent such a grisly scene and commit it to writing bespeaks the infirmity of her moral condition.⁹⁸

This recalls nothing so much as those male critics who could never credit that Mary Shelley had written *Frankenstein*, and whose enquiries had prompted her to write the 1831 Introduction.

This gives the text of *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* a feminist sheen, as the reader knowingly dismisses Walton's bigoted and outdated views, and listens to the voice of another woman rescued from the margins of literary history. This is ostensibly reinforced by Roszak in his 'Author's Note' which engages with feminist discourse, invoking the name of Mary Wollstonecraft, and describing Mary Shelley as having been 'as liberated as her mother'.⁹⁹ However, Roszak is so busy demonstrating his feminist credentials that he does not notice his own assumptions which undermine his whole project, chief of which is that Mary Shelley needs to be spoken for. He takes it as a given that 'Mary Shelley used herself as the model for Elizabeth, the tragic fiancée of Victor Frankenstein.'¹⁰⁰ This forms the rationale

⁹⁷ Roszak, p. 298.

⁹⁸ Roszak, p. 299.

⁹⁹ Roszak, p. ix

¹⁰⁰ Roszak, p. ix.

supporting the project of his fiction: in not giving Elizabeth a voice, she was thereby repressing her own voice. Roszak also borrows the rhetoric that Mary Shelley was unconscious: 'In placing an alchemical romance at the center of the novel, Mary Shelley was delving deeper into the psychological foundations of Western science than she may consciously have realized.'¹⁰¹ In the final lines of his note, Roszak concludes: 'I hope that, speaking here as the bride of Frankenstein, she [Mary Shelley] will at last find the voice she was not free to adopt in her own day.'¹⁰² To the end of his short note, Roszak disingenuously maintains the fiction that what follows is somehow Mary Shelley speaking to the reader via the medium of Elizabeth Frankenstein. He conveniently omits himself from this narrative chain, apparently forgetting that Mary Shelley is dead, and that Elizabeth Frankenstein is not real, so neither of them can possibly be speaking to us in any capacity at all. In this way, Roszak invents a lacuna in Mary Shelley's oeuvre expressly so he can chivalrously restore it, thus saving the literary day (much as Aldiss saves the world from the mayhem unconsciously released by Mary Shelley when she wrote *Frankenstein*).

As can easily be discerned from the closing paragraphs of this chapter, there has been a distinct tapering off in the sightings of the fictional Mary Shelley in recent years. This can be largely explained by the phenomenon of media saturation. The scene at Diodati, having peaked in usage in the late eighties and early nineties¹⁰³ simply became a literary-historical cliché, and authors either began to deconstruct the process of historical fiction (in the case of Alasdair Gray), or simply to settle for the most outlandish account of the situation they could muster (in the case of Federico Andahazi).

It is difficult to see how such a brawling variety of texts can be corralled into the tidy space of a conclusion, but from a broad perspective it is possible to detect common threads and trends in the representation of Mary Shelley over the last three decades: genres adopted and abandoned, new metaphors developed, themes gradually widening in scope, and contexts changing. The most prominent development that has taken place since the appearance of the earlier novels is the gradual 'gothicisation' of

¹⁰¹ Roszak, p. x.

¹⁰² Roszak, p. x.

¹⁰³ This is arguably the result of the impact of Ken Russell's film *Gothic* released in 1986. A rough and thoroughly unscientific indication of its impact comes from the responses I have received when telling those who asked about the topic of my thesis. *Gothic* was consistently the first, and often the only, fictional representation of Mary Shelley that most could remember or were aware of.

Mary Shelley's biographical narrative. Most obviously, the scene at Diodati in 1816 offers too many opportunities for a Gothic narrative to be resisted: a large house occupied by adolescent girls and sexually predatory men, ghost-stories, visions and mind-altering substances; even the stormy weather complies with literary convention. There is also the missing portion of Mary Shelley's journal that needs to be rewritten, thus providing the requisite incomplete manuscript, which is also represented in Mary Shelley's actual journal, which is far too uninformative to constitute anything approaching the 'true' story. Finally, there is, at the centre of it all, Mary Shelley's creation of *Frankenstein* itself: she becomes the monster himself, or her tragic history as a mother is deployed to render the novel a fable of bad parenting and artistic creation. Ultimately however, these narratives pall through overuse, and in the later years, her story begins to be used as a tool to illustrate the breakdown of the borders between fiction and history.

A picture is gradually emerging of how the depiction of Mary Shelley changes over time in accordance with broader cultural and moral conventions. This much would be a truism; however we are also beginning to see how the framing of that portrait is determined not only by the generic features of the texts in which she appears, but by the fictive features to be found in her own life and work. But ultimately the variety of fictions in which she finds herself has produced a figure which is, to a certain extent, all things to all writers. In rough chronological order Mary Shelley has been so far: Victorian Angel in the House (incredibly, given the general public opprobrium in which Percy was held for much of the nineteenth century); boring housewife or evil harridan; double symbol of horror (she not only created a monster, but was a woman too); feminist icon; sexual libertine. In the words of Fred Botting, she has truly become 'a multiplicity of Marys'.¹⁰⁴ It could be argued that this is the result of the multiple tendencies of the novel as a medium, and certainly as we move on to later chapters, it becomes possible to see how medium, as well as genre, becomes a determining force in her depiction. In the drama explored in the next chapter, we find the figure of Mary Shelley to be a more consistently radical figure than has so far been encountered.

¹⁰⁴ Fred Botting, *Making Monstrous: Frankenstein, Criticism, Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 75.

4. She Comes to Life: Mary Shelley on Stage.

The next two chapters will show the development of the character of Mary Shelley as she appears in theatre and film, and how those two media have produced two correspondingly distinct figures. Naturally, this is because of the very differences inherent in stage and film-productions, but also, less predictably, because of the two quite separate heritages of the screen-Mary and the stage-Mary. The difference between these two beings is a result of the differing bloodlines that fed the twentieth-century fictions. The films can claim descent directly from the original stage versions of *Frankenstein* that were being produced only a few years after the novel's publication in 1818. Thus, in the film-world at least, Mary Shelley was always the author of *Frankenstein* before she was anything else. On the other hand, the stage-character of Mary Shelley has a very similar line of development to that of her character in prose fiction. This is because the very first plays in which she appeared were about Percy, and therefore she plays a similar background role as consort to her more famous husband. It is not until Liz Lochhead's 1984 play, *Blood and Ice* that she moves to centre-stage. As shall become clear, the change is fuelled not only by the rise in her critical reputation, but also by changes in British drama of the late twentieth century.

The history of Mary Shelley as a character on stage begins with Elma Dangerfield's biographical play of the poet, *Mad Shelley: A Dramatic Life in Five Acts* (1936). We can see in this earliest play that not only do the plays and the novels about the Shelley circle share sources, but generic characteristics too. The very length of this play, which at over 250 pages, and four hours performance time, precludes it from performance as it stands (and which the author herself acknowledges in a prefatory note). It is a reader's text in other ways too: to begin with, it covers Percy Shelley's life from Eton to the Gulf of Spezzia, much as a full-length biography or novel would. Dangerfield works her way methodically through Shelley's life, with each scene depicting a key moment from the biography: for instance, the first act consists of Shelley's bullying at Eton, under the headmastership of the infamous Dr Keate; it introduces the Shelley family, and Percy's romance with and rejection by Harriet Grove, and ends with *The Necessity of Atheism* and Percy's expulsion from Oxford. The rest of the play follows a similarly detailed structure. Where it is not

possible to follow the biographical narrative in as much detail as a prose biography would, Dangerfield telescopes scenes so that several events and arrivals occur on the same stage-day or evening, whilst she packs as much significant detail into the stage directions as she can. The narrative arc is that of a biography with the beginning, middle and end corresponding with the early life, maturity and death of the central character. Dangerfield has revealed in interview that the play was in fact originally written to be read,¹ and unlike later plays which select scenes from Percy or Mary Shelley's life to make or illustrate a wider point, perhaps about human relationships, writing, or politics, Dangerfield's point is Percy Bysshe Shelley's life itself.

However, this difference can also be explained by looking at the theatrical context of *Mad Shelley*. It is very probable that Dangerfield's play grew out of a trend current at the time for biographical drama of individual historical figures. One of the leading playwrights of this type was John Drinkwater, whose most successful work was *Abraham Lincoln* (1918), but who also produced plays about Mary Stuart and Oliver Cromwell (both in 1921). Other plays in this category include H. F. Rubinstein and Clifford Bax's *Shakespeare* (1921), Reginald Berkley's *The Lady with the Lamp* (1929), and Rudolf Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930). In 1936, a rash of plays about Byron was also published.² In his study of historical drama, *Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama*, D. Keith Peacock describes Bax's *Shakespeare*:

Any sense of historical period is contributed by means of reference to contemporary figures and places, by costume and set, and by dialogue phrased in an acceptable pastiche of Elizabethan English. The result is therefore that Shakespeare is portrayed not in the context of a society at a given moment in history, but primarily in terms of his personal relationships.³

Peacock goes on to argue that with all of these kinds of historical drama, 'generally absent from [them] was either any sense of social criticism or any attempt to employ

¹ Kirsten Sarna, *'Mad Shelley: A Dramatic Life in Five Acts' by Elma Dangerfield, O.B.E.: Evolving the Perception of a Biographical Character in Dramatic Play Form* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1995), p.17.

² See Oscar José Santucho, *George Gordon, Lord Byron: A Comprehensive Bibliography of Secondary Materials in English, 1807-1974* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 597. It is also clear from this bibliography that Byron has been a perennially popular subject for drama and fiction.

³ D. Keith Peacock, *Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991), pp. 20-21.

the past to comment upon the present.’⁴ An important exception to this was George Bernard Shaw whose use of historical figures like Saint Joan were to anticipate a more radical theatrical engagement with history that did not become common until later in the twentieth century. However, *Mad Shelley* falls comfortably into the anodyne type of historical drama described above. Peacock’s description of *Shakespeare* certainly contextualises various features of *Mad Shelley*: its focus on Percy’s various relationships with different women, (the two Harriets, Claire, Mary, Jane), and its rather cursory reference to his works. Certainly in the first act he is expelled from Oxford for ‘The Necessity of Atheism’, but we are merely informed of the terrible scandal caused by the idea of atheism, rather than any details of its wider implications. It serves primarily to illustrate Percy’s rebelliousness:

SHELLEY (*fanatically*) And why should I not have heretical theories, and pernicious doctrines, if I choose?... and declare them to the world, if I can make it read them?

MR. SLATTER (*stubbornly*) I refuse to be the means by which you do. – How can you persist in such strange and absurd notions?

MR. SHELLEY [*sic*] (*determinedly*) Because I firmly believe in them, and I glory in the course I have adopted.

MR. SLATTER (*entreatingly*) I entreat you to see the error of your ways – for your own sake, your friends, your connections...

SHELLEY What do I care about them? – What do they care about me? I have no friends, except Mr. Hogg. – And as for my relations – they regard me as an outcast already...a pariah...an exile.⁵

As can be seen in this extract, Dangerfield’s Percy is a close relative of the schoolboy rebels found in the novels of Frank Kenyon and Guy Bolton discussed in Chapter Two. Kirsten Sarna claims that ‘prefabricated pictures of Shelley, as they are sketched, are being put to the test by Mrs Dangerfield, and consequently they are reassessed, altered, and corrected by her readers’.⁶ This is an admirable objective, but it would have been better executed had Dangerfield provided some political, historical, or social context for her drama, thus rendering the title of her play as ironic as she had originally intended. Dangerfield has merely perpetuated one of the clichés

⁴ Peacock, p. 21.

⁵ Elma Dangerfield, *Mad Shelley: A Dramatic Life in Five Acts* ([1936] Ormskirk: Thomas Lyster, 1992), p.43.

⁶ Sarna, pp. 12-13.

Sarna claims her to be resisting in the title of the play: that Shelley was mad, and therefore his political and social views could be dismissed as aberrations, whilst his poetry eulogised as the product of a singular genius.

All this inevitably affects the kind of character that Mary Shelley becomes in Dangerfield's play, and just as Percy Shelley is a similar figure to that found in the earlier fiction, so Mary is once again the right woman for the job of helpmeet to a genius:

MARY (*fingering his Coat*) Poor Shelley!... Why are your eyes so bloodshot, and your hair and dress so awry?...

SHELLEY (*frantically*) You know why perfectly well...And because of this...(He pulls a bottle of *Laudanum* out of his pocket) – I carry it always with me...I never part from it!

MARY (*horrified*) Oh! you must be careful! You might kill yourself by accident!...

SHELLEY Or intent...The other night I tried to...I wanted to finish the whole sorry business, after I left you –

MARY (*trembling with shock*) Shelley!...How terrible!...

SHELLEY Then I stopped – just in time – for I thought of how – if supported by you – I might enroll my name among the great and good who have been some use to humanity...

MARY Oh, Bysshe, do I really inspire you to that extent?...

SHELLEY You have the subtlest, and most exquisitely fashioned intelligence, of any woman I have ever met –

MARY (*delightedly*) You flatterer!

SHELLEY (*romantically*) It's true. – I have no interest in anyone except you.- Your thoughts strike sparks in me.⁷

Here we are presented with a Mary Shelley who interacts with her beloved solely in the form of responses, and as a 'prompt' so that Dangerfield can expose Shelley's instability further (uttering the faintly ludicrous line 'You might kill yourself by accident!'). As well as this though, we are told, through Percy's statements, of Mary's great intelligence. It is, however, an intelligence that is never actually demonstrated to the audience, merely referred to, and it is her concern with rather more domestic matters that is demonstrated here (shown, for instance, in her fingering of Shelley's coat). It is noteworthy that one of Dangerfield's sources, cited in the bibliography printed at the end of the play, is André Maurois' *Ariel*, in which Mary is

⁷ Dangerfield, p. 95.

also primarily a domestic figure, satirized by Maurois as a superficial housewife. In *Mad Shelley* she becomes embroiled in trivial arguments with Jane Williams over saucepans, just as she does in *Ariel* and she sighs of Jane, 'If only she would be content to be a pretty Woman, and not a Housewife like me!'.⁸ Another aspect of Dangerfield's style which is evident in the extracts quoted is her idiosyncratic use of stage directions. Their prevalence suggest the pen of a novelist, rather than that of a playwright accustomed to the knowledge that actors and a director will fill out what might have been a barer text.

As with any fiction based on historical events and characters, there is a good deal of incident and language reproduced from biographical sources, and which render *Mad Shelley* a species of biography itself. Much of that dialogue is reconfigured from the actual letters and journals of the historical figures. There are dozens of examples that could be cited, but the ones I will use also show how the quotations are not simply jigsaw pieces fitted together to create a new text, but are themselves re-shaped so that the new text is an entirely different creature from the originals from which it is made. For instance during a long exchange at the beginning of their affair, before their elopement, Mary yearns: 'when you leave after dinner, - when I go to my room, - there is no sweet Shelley, no dear love.'⁹ This has been taken from a letter written by the historical Mary Shelley in July 1815 over a year after the dialogue of the play is set ('when I retire to my room no sweet Love - after dinner no Shelley').¹⁰ Moreover, Dangerfield not only transposes the sources chronologically, but also from person to person, so that her Percy wonders 'Ah! Sweet Elf, why should we not soar over the mountains and seas, and pounce on some little spot? - a house with a lawn, a river, or lake, noble trees, and divine hills - these should be our little mousehole to creep into?'.¹¹ This is in fact from a letter Mary wrote in December 1816, over two years after the scene as it is set in Dangerfield's play: 'Ah - were you indeed a winged Elf and could soar over mountains & seas and could pounce on the little spot - A house with a lawn a river or a lake - noble trees & divine mountains that should be our little mousehole to retire to.'¹² This is a phenomenon we can see occurring in many of the other fictions, but it is more

⁸ Dangerfield, p. 213.

⁹ Dangerfield, p. 96.

¹⁰ *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 VOLS (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980 & 1983), I, p.15 (27 July 1815).

¹¹ Dangerfield, p. 104.

¹² *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, I, p.22 (5 December 1816).

obvious in Dangerfield's play because of her almost continuous quotation from original sources. It is an exaggerated form of a feature to be found in many of the other fictions and shows how many historical fictions demonstrate their 'made-ness' more stridently than other forms of fiction; the degree of stridency clearly depends on the skill of the writer, but the condition remains. It is an emblem of how all the fictional rewritings, to a greater or lesser extent, have been constructed from parts of other texts, for that is all that remains of their subject's lives. Biographies, letters, journals, anecdotes, accounts, newspaper articles, and the subject's works themselves, are all plundered, picked over and reassembled to create a new text.

Where Dangerfield uses ready-made bricks in the construction of her drama, Sam Bate uses a whole prefabricated framework for his 1955 play, *Shelley and Mary*. It was published as part of series of one-act plays by H.F.W.Deane, billed as *A Romantic Play in One Act*, and focused in somewhat briefer terms than Dangerfield on the meeting and elopement of Percy and Mary. The series of plays of which it was a part, judging from the way they were promoted in a catalogue produced by the publisher (which specialised in theatrical handbooks and play-scripts), were aimed at small companies, with limited resources. The catalogue contains a summary of each play with an assessment of its advantages for production. The blurb for Bate's play runs:

Scene, the house of Mr and Mrs Godwin, near St. Pancras Church. A romantic play on the subject of Shelley's second marriage, during which he proposes to Mary Wollstonecraft [*sic*] and they arrange to go abroad together. A variety of other good character parts. Irrascible [*sic*] and dominating Mrs Godwin and William her weak henpecked husband, Mary's friend Clare and Coleridge the poet.¹³

Luckily Bate is slightly more attentive to the details of the historical situation than his blurb-writer, but not much more so, as the presence of Coleridge in this scenario will attest. The events of July 1814 are shaped around a traditional romantic plot, that could even be described as an archetypal fairy-tale: the play opens with Mrs Godwin scolding Mary for, 'Staring into space and scribbling ridiculous verses [...] Just look at the dust on the mantel! Give you a simple task and you are too moonstruck to do

¹³ *Plays and their Plots* (London: H.F.W. Deane, [1961(?)]), p.106.

it.’¹⁴ She berates her husband for his borrowing and inability to earn any money, whilst cooing at her own daughter, Claire ‘I’ll concoct something tasty to tempt your appetite.’¹⁵ In Mrs Godwin, then, we have the Wicked Stepmother, and Mary the long-suffering Cinderella. Claire is the favoured child, who secretly sympathises with her step-sister: ‘Mother’s in one of her tantrums again. Sometimes I hate her for the way she treats you.’¹⁶ The scene is set for the introduction of romantic interest to lighten the mood, and provide Mary with a way of escape. Shelley arrives with Coleridge, the latter a kindly older gentleman who sympathises with Mr. Godwin by offering him money, and then ushers him out of the room to discuss ‘several stanzas of a poem I’d like your opinion on’ at the appropriate moment so that Mary and Shelley can be alone together.¹⁷ Claire is far more adroit than her sister at noting the significance of these movements:

MARY Whatever do you mean, you silly child.
 CLAIRE I am not a child. I’m sixteen and I mean that
 your eyes are shining like stars – and so are his.
 MARY You imagine things.
 CLAIRE That I do not! I think he is going to ask for your
 hand tonight.
 MARY (*nervously*) Claire!
 CLAIRE I think that is why Mr Coleridge has taken
 stepfather to his room. I think it has been arranged
 between Mr. Coleridge and Mr. Shelley.
 MARY (*crossing to the window*) You are being fanciful.
 They could not have known that stepmother would be
 out.
 CLAIRE Mr. Coleridge could. She always visits Aunt
 Sarah’s on a Tuesday evening. Mr. Coleridge knows,
 because he is often here on a Tuesday.
 [...]
 MARY Claire, what shall I do?
 CLAIRE (*to her*) Do? Say yes, of course. You don’t want
 to stay here for the rest of your life, do you?¹⁸

In this extract, we can see that not only is Coleridge constructed as an omniscient Fairy Godfather, but Percy is the Handsome Prince who has come to rescue Cinderella-Mary from a life of drudgery. The conventional proposal of marriage, and

¹⁴ Sam Bate, *Shelley and Mary* (London: H.F.W. Deane, 1955), p.4.

¹⁵ Bate, p.5.

¹⁶ Bate, p. 5.

¹⁷ Bate, p. 13.

¹⁸ Bate, p. 14.

the presence of the recognisable figure of Coleridge, which are both historically anomalous, only confirms Bate's use of a prefabricated narrative structure. It is a structure that funnels the events of 1814 into a mould that is easily reproduced by a small amateur theatre company, and one that is moreover easily recognised and assimilated by an undemanding audience. Bate, although he has produced a highly conventional drama, shows himself to be unusual in the practice of historical drama, because his concern is to create recognisable character types and situations, rather than to reproduce 'what really happened'. Bate, like Dangerfield, and in common with the earlier novelists, has the creation of a conventional piece of genre-writing as his prime objective.

A broader similarity between the novels and the dramas is the gradual change in the presentation of the Shelleys that occurred through the 1960s. This decade held the seeds both of the feminist reappraisal of Mary Shelley that took place in the 1970s, and the foregrounding of Percy's radical politics in Richard Holmes' re-defining biography, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974). The changes that took place in the field of drama itself also affected how the Shelleys were represented on stage. These changes are commonly attributed to the perceived revolution that took place in British drama with the arrival of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). The commonly held view of this period in British theatre, is that it was dominated by polite dramas by Noël Coward, Terence Rattigan and others like them, which were largely set in middle-class drawing-rooms, in a tradition that had held sway since the advent of Naturalism in the late nineteenth century. Osborne's play was set in a Northern town, with a central character who was defiantly and angrily working-class, and who spent most of the play railing against the political and social status quo. Dan Rebellato, in his reassessment of the period, *1956 And All That* (1999), points out that so many drama critics and theorists have expressed this view of Osborne's position in twentieth-century drama over the years that it has ossified into cliché. He believes that it is a view that too easily dismisses drama from before that period, and that Osborne and his successors were far less politically energized than is commonly believed.

However, for the purposes of this study, it is, despite its well-worn credentials, a useful model by which to trace the passage of the Shelleys through twentieth-century drama. Certainly it can be said that Dangerfield's and Bate's plays fall into a

very broad definition of what could be called 'drawing-room drama', depicting domestic and personal relationships, while later plays that centre around the Shelleys are far more politically engaged. The politically radical tradition at the Royal Court, which started with Shaw, and continued with Osborne, took the Shelleys along with it through the writing of Ann Jellicoe. She was a playwright closely associated with the theatre, and ran improvisational workshops there. Her play, *Shelley: The Idealist* was first produced there in 1965. The interest in Mary Shelley that burgeoned in the 1960s was still only confined to corners of the academic world, and had not yet reached a wider audience, so it is unsurprising that Ann Jellicoe's play still has Percy Shelley very much at its centre. Like Dangerfield's play it is a biographical drama of the poet, presented in roughly chronological order. Unlike Dangerfield, however, Jellicoe's keener sense of purpose means that there is far more apposite selection and editing of biographical material. Her portrait of Shelley is explicitly political, which means that she ignores Shelley's early life at Eton, and we first meet him at Oxford with Hogg having just published *The Necessity of Atheism*, and about to be expelled. In previous rewritings of this scene, he has been conveyed as little more than a naughty schoolboy, but in Jellicoe's play it is the setting for a more complex moral battle between Shelley and his craven and hypocritical academic superiors. The rest of the act's seven scenes are taken up with his seduction of and elopement with Harriet Westbrook. Act Two opens two years later after the birth of Ianthe and at the point that Harriet and Percy's marriage begins to break down. He meets Mary, producing one crisis after another, the Act ending with Harriet's suicide and Percy losing custody of his children. Act Three leaps forward another few years to 1822 and scenes of unhappiness and recrimination between Mary and Percy just before his death. The play ends with a monologue spoken by Trelawny describing the scene of Percy's funeral (the wording of which is taken almost verbatim from Trelawny's *Records*).

Jellicoe's play focuses on Percy's relationships with women: his sister, Hellen, Harriet, and Mary, and it is through these relationships that the figure of Shelley, the idealist, reveals himself as both hero and anti-hero. In two parallel exchanges with Hellen and Harriet, for example, we see that his ideal of freedom and justice for all does not take account of the somewhat more difficult position of women in early nineteenth-century society. First, Percy is attempting to persuade Hellen to stand up to her school authorities:

SHELLEY I did. It's just the same at Oxford, there's no justice or dignity in anything they do, they are utterly corrupt and you must stand against them or you, too, will be corrupted.

HELLEN Yes, but you – you're big and important, it's the big world, you're a man.

SHELLEY The school is your world, within the context of school the situation is exactly the same.

HELLEN But you're a man.

SHELLEY It's no different for women.

HELLEN It is.¹⁹

And a similar exchange takes place with Harriet:

SHELLEY I stood against my father's injustice, you must do the same.

HARRIET But I haven't any money. I've nothing to live on, how can I live?

SHELLEY I live.

HARRIET But you're a man.

SHELLEY Man, woman, it makes no difference.

HARRIET It does.

SHELLEY It doesn't.

HARRIET It does.²⁰

Neither Harriet nor Hellen can properly express their difficulties but it is clear that they are aware of them, however dimly. Harriet certainly fares better than Hellen in her ability to articulate barely conscious thoughts and manages to fight against Shelley's inexorable logic: 'If I have to leave this house where will I go? How will I live? If only they'd teach girls something useful, instead of deportment and a little French [...]. I see, I see it's a deliberate act to keep us inferior and helpless like you say. I see that. But you see it has happened to me, I can do nothing.'²¹ Percy, however, is ultimately disappointed, and yearns, 'We need women who dare! Women who dare. Oh, for a woman who would dare.'²²

Even though Hellen and Harriet are presented as essentially weaker, less intelligent characters than Percy himself, in his dialogue with them they are the means by which the audience becomes aware of how his ideals clash with the reality that life

¹⁹ Ann Jellicoe, *Shelley, or The Idealist* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 52.

²⁰ Jellicoe, p. 59.

²¹ Jellicoe, p. 60.

²² Jellicoe, p. 54.

is constantly throwing at him. At first, Mary is presented as a foil to the women whom we have met in the first half of the play. Where Hellen and Harriet are shown to struggle with Shelley's ideas, and find themselves caught between his ideals and the demands of wider social pressures (represented in the first act by Harriet's conventional and domineering older sister Eliza), Mary Godwin is presented as being the 'woman who dares' so yearned for by Shelley in the first act. She is the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft who is hero-worshipped by the poet, and the biographical information that she was the first to declare love when they met is used by Jellicoe to define Mary in contrast to the women who have gone before. In a long and rambling speech, she shows herself to be capable of just that rebellion against social institutions Percy so wanted from Harriet and Hellen. Although she apparently speaks as haltingly as the women earlier in the play, she is finally more articulate and less passive:

You are married, a married man. Well, I know your views upon love and marriage – that they should not be selfish and exclusive and everything. They're my mother's views...and my views and...Well, being married, if you were to meet someone whom you – liked and who liked – perhaps more than liked – you. You – would you not feel – being married and so unable to ask her to marry you[...] And, I – I understand, because it is a lot, these days, it won't always be like this, but it is a lot now for a woman to – to...come to a man without being married to him...So it seems to me, that it is so much that it should be the woman who offers, don't you think? I mean if she really – if she really...²³

The circuitous route taken by Mary to the nub of the matter, with its repetitions and hesitations, demonstrates her nervousness and agitated state of mind. This state of mind in turn demonstrates her awareness of the social implications of what she is doing and their magnitude; despite these she is forging ahead with her attempt to live by her own and her mother's principles.

So, Percy has at last found his 'woman who would dare.' Unfortunately, there is a price to pay for this daring, and after Harriet's suicide in Act Two, Scene Six (staged in such a way as to echo Wollstonecraft's attempt, spoken about by Harriet earlier in the play), we are presented with a short scene with events from 1817 in

²³ Jellicoe, p. 76.

which Percy loses custody of his and Harriet's children, and then the long penultimate scene set just before his drowning. In this we learn of the deaths of his and Mary's children, as well as her current unhealthy pregnancy, and Percy's infatuation with Jane Williams. In the final bitter exchange of the scene Mary expresses the belief that 'We are paying for Harriet's misery':

MARY [...] You sent her to her death. That's why we're so unhappy. We're paying now. You abandoned Harriet and she killed herself.

SHELLEY You are distorting the facts.

MARY You killed Harriet.

SHELLEY My sin towards Harriet, my only sin, was in ever marrying her. I should never have married her. I did not abandon her, I gave her money, she had her children and her family, I besought, I implored her to make her home with us. What more could I do that would not have distorted and destroyed our lives? Finally Harriet killed herself not because of my fault but because she was pregnant by another man and driven from home. It was the cruelty of her family and her own weakness.

MARY You killed her that is why we are unhappy.

Pause

SHELLEY So at last even you, abandon me.

MARY And I warn you: if you leave me, I shall kill myself too.²⁴

These are amongst the closing lines of the penultimate scene, just before the final scene in which only Trelawny gives his account of the funeral pyre. The close positioning of Mary's ultimatum and the death of her husband could serve to hint that Percy's drowning was partially self-inflicted and undertaken to escape impossible demands and accusations being made by his increasingly unstable wife. Mary Shelley, in this interpretation, becomes both hysterical drama-queen, and a woman driven to the edge of her sanity by a husband insistent on pursuing his principles to their last letter, even when it involves causing immense pain to those around him. Jellicoe believed Percy Shelley to be a tragic hero, 'insofar as he was a great man destroyed by his own tragic flaw: his blindness to the frailty of human nature'.²⁵ In the context of this statement, and also Jellicoe's expression of his central dilemma –

²⁴ Jellicoe, pp. 108-9.

²⁵ Jellicoe, p. 18.

‘To save [those around him] pain, should he compromise?’ – it is difficult not to see his drowning as a willed act, that thereby becomes part of a created narrative arc, in which the tragic hero must die as a direct consequence of his flaws.²⁶ Percy saves his wife and others pain, not by compromising, but by escaping the dilemma altogether by dying. Jellicoe’s view of Mary Shelley as expressed in her preface should also be noted, and also from which sources it comes. Jellicoe is not specific about these at first, but it soon becomes clear from further comments she makes, which sources guide her view:

Where I have been most free, because the facts are not known, is in his final relationship with Mary. It is known that there was trouble. Trelawny’s evidence that Mary only really appreciated Shelley when she had lost him, Shelley’s own veiled remarks, and Leigh Hunt, a kind and tolerant man, refusing to give up Shelley’s heart to Mary after the burning, all show that in the eyes of their most intimate friends Mary had behaved badly.²⁷

Jellicoe is aware that her vision of Mary Shelley is received through ‘the eyes of their most intimate friends’, and not Mary’s herself. This is also demonstrated in the text of the play itself when Jellicoe has Mary bitterly observe to Percy, ‘They all think you’re wonderful, look at their eyes, how they despise me.’²⁸ The character knows she is being measured against Percy and found wanting. This is a neat illustration of how her image has been shaped primarily by the eyes of Percy’s friends and biographers, rather than those who might have been more sympathetic to her state of mind at the time. It is a phenomenon observed by Miranda Seymour when she offers an explanation for Trelawny’s negative views. When he was living near the Shelleys in Pisa in the last months of Percy’s life, he was,

[...] often living with the Williamses. Edward was his closest friend; Edward was also the chosen confidant of Shelley at a time when Shelley was making dissatisfied comparisons between his own marriage and the easy, tender relationship which existed between Edward and Jane

²⁶ Jellicoe, p. 18.

²⁷ Jellicoe, pp. 18-19.

²⁸ Jellicoe, p. 107.

[...] It is unlikely that any of them troubled to ask Mary for her side of the story.²⁹

Despite Jellicoe's claim in her preface that 'I agree with almost every word Shelley says',³⁰ her position regarding Percy Shelley, as demonstrated by her depiction of Mary Shelley, is more ambivalent than she cares to admit.

As with the earlier plays the focus is primarily on personal relationships, but Jellicoe shows how society at large, its mores and laws, impinges on the private world of the individual: Harriet's overriding concern with 'what will people say' is the embodiment of how public rules affect private behaviour. These features are all of a piece with the developments in historical dramas noted by Peacock in *Radical Stages* who focuses especially on the influence of Brecht's theories on the presentation of history and historical character on stage. Brecht advocated the idea that historical figures must be shown in their relationship with, and effect on, their wider social and historical context. Certainly Jellicoe shows all the characters grappling with their social conditions, and shows the consequences of Percy and Mary's attempt to live according to their principles. However, their ultimate failure did not chime with the growing revolutionary fervour that was beginning to mark the political drama of the 1970s, and so perhaps goes some way to explaining their disappearance from the stage for nearly twenty years.

When they do appear again, in Liz Lochhead's 1984 play *Blood and Ice*, it is with Mary Shelley at centre stage. This renewed interest can almost certainly be attributed to her rediscovery by feminist academics that peaked towards the end of the 1970s and continued on into the 1980s. *Blood and Ice* was Lochhead's first excursion into drama from her more usual medium of poetry, and as such emerged partly from a different sensibility, and also from a different community of writers. Its concerns are political, but centred around the politics of gender and writing rather than the left/right politics of the Royal Court. *Blood and Ice* in its first incarnation was produced in 1981 in Coventry, and was called *Mary and the Monster*. Neither Lochhead nor the critics were particularly pleased with it, and she went on to revise it for the Edinburgh Festival of 1982. Despite the fact that 'this one was certainly a lot more like the

²⁹ Seymour, p. 287.

³⁰ Jellicoe, pp. 17-18.

Thing – and some, especially posh, papers, reviewed it very well’,³¹ Lochhead remained unhappy with it until it was produced by Pepper’s Ghost Theatre Company in London in 1984. This is the version of the play I shall be using here, partly because it seems to be the one with which Lochhead was happiest, but also because it is the version that does not draw explicit parallels between *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley’s life, and therefore its exploration of the relation between the two is subtler and more complex.

The central character is Mary Shelley, ‘in whose consciousness,’ claims Lochhead, the ‘entire play takes place.’³² The two acts of the play tell the story of the creation of *Frankenstein* through flashbacks from the play’s ‘present’, just after Byron’s death. The first act consists of one long scene which establishes the relationships between the main characters (Mary, Claire, Byron, Shelley and, unusually, Elise, the Shelleys’ maid and nanny), while the second is of eight short scenes in which their various crises are worked out. As Lochhead points out, the events of the play all take place in Mary’s consciousness, and so the splits and contradictions of her personality are all expressed through her battles with each of the other characters: her sibling rivalry with Claire; her efforts to tame Percy’s idealism; her fight against her attraction to the cruelly honest Byron; the guilt produced in her by Elise. Each scene opens with Mary packing in the nursery of the present, and reading scenes from *Frankenstein* which segue into scenes from her own past.

The first of these depicts Mary laughingly chiding Percy for having appeared naked to her tea-guests,³³ trying to accommodate the delight and anxiety he seems to produce simultaneously in her. Her relationship with her sister is more fraught, and slips easily into its childhood mode of rivalry, shown in their lapses into childish dialogue (‘CLAIRE: My ball! MARY: Mine! CLAIRE: My book! MARY: It’s mine! My hair-ribbon! CLAIRE: Mine! Oh, keep your old hair-ribbon. I’m prettier than you anyhow! MARY: I’m cleverer than you.’³⁴). In a game of blind-man’s buff that Percy and Claire play with her, we also see Mary’s insecurity about her position in their friendship, as she stumbles between them and their laughter. Byron enters and Mary,

³¹ Liz Lochhead, ‘Afterword’ to *Blood and Ice* in *Plays by Women 4* ed. by Michelene Wandor (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 117-118 (p. 118). Hereafter, ‘Afterword’.

³² ‘Afterword’, p. 118.

³³ This is an incident reported to have happened much later, when the Shelleys were living in Italy towards the end of Percy’s life.

³⁴ Liz Lochhead, *Blood and Ice* in *Plays by Women 4*, ed. by Michelene Wandor (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 81-116 (p. 88).

blindfolded, mistakes him for Percy: 'Shelley! Oh free me - '.³⁵ Meanwhile, Claire dances attendance on Byron who all but ignores her; he, on the other hand is intensely fascinated with Mary, deliberately flirting with her, while she evades his verbal grip. They fall into a good-humoured dispute about William Godwin's system of principles which gradually becomes less good-humoured as Byron becomes more insistent. He uses Elise in cruel thought-experiment to demonstrate the inhumanity and coldness of Godwin's views. Claire wishes for more light-hearted games, and they begin to speak of *Fantasmagoriana* which they have recently discovered, while Mary begins to recite chillingly from Coleridge's *Christabel*. Percy has his vision and runs from the room, while Claire goes to attend to him. Mary and Byron are left alone and they enter a philosophical dispute, first about her and Percy's 'experiment' in love with Percy's friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, which Byron rails at: '...intellectually I can conceive of it, Mrs. Shelley. But there is something...hideously unnatural in such a cold-blooded put-together passion, is there not?'³⁶ They go on to discuss more abstract matters and when Byron sees through Mary's attempts to defend Percy's behaviour, he tells her:

You know in the cool clarity of your heart-of-hearts you are *not* the over-optimistic sort. You are not the child who ran away with Percy Shelley! Mary, you are getting good and sick, I know it, of Ariel's head-in-the-clouds hopefulness. Come on, come down to earth, where you belong, come and curl up with old Clubfooted Caliban!³⁷

During their exchange the sexual tension has grown steadily until it threatens to be released, but Claire interrupts them, and the act ends with Mary's dream of the creation of *Frankenstein*, as recounted in the 1831 Introduction.

The second act consists of eight shorter scenes all of which take place some years after the publication of *Frankenstein*, and in which we learn why Mary is re-reading her story in the present of the play. When Mary dismisses it as 'A silly work of fantasy' which is 'my albatross', Byron wonders,

Have you read your book? Oh, I know you *wrote* it,
have you read it though recently?

³⁵ Lochhead, p. 89.

³⁶ Lochhead, p. 100.

³⁷ Lochhead, p. 101.

I'm sure it is silly of me to read between the lines though. Oh, if only the naughty reader would keep his gladeyes on the text. No profit in noticing an author name a character after her beloved baba, blonde curls and all, and then strangle him to death on page sixty-nine - oh, not many mamas, especially not busy fingered distracted mamas, who have not occasionally, en passant, wished to silence the little darling.

MARY I am afraid of you.

BYRON Don't be afraid, Mary. Courage!

Flicks at her Mama's pendant [...]

Read that story. Read your story.³⁸

Hence, *Frankenstein* becomes the means by which Mary reassesses her life. Compared to these later scenes, the first act depicts a time of relative innocence, when Mary's battles with Byron over her principles are theoretical: they have not yet been tested. Act Two shows how her and the others' circumstances become progressively more difficult, beginning with Byron's veto on Claire having contact with Allegra, moving through the deaths of Clara and William, the scandal over Elise and her dismissal, the death of Allegra, and finally Mary's miscarriage. Each scene is set just after each of these events has occurred, and the structural effect is one of cumulative tragedy. Meanwhile, the effect on character is that Mary Shelley grows from hypocrisy and self-delusion into self-realisation over the course of the play. The difficulties first dimly sensed by the women characters in Jellicoe's play, are more fully articulated here: that the possession of principles that resist the constrictions of conventional society, or the creation of original works of art is not something that can happen outside the bounds of gender. Mary expresses this insight towards the end of the play when imagining the talk of the servants at the time of her mother's death: "Midwife says the babe will live, [...] she has little hopes for the mother! And it looks as though reading or writing or love or money isn't going to stop her dying exactly the way the Cook's own sister the laundress did!"³⁹ Nor can they happen outside the bounds of class, as Mary learns when Elise, who she has taught to read, turns that education on her own mistress:

Well, I read the book too! You were always encouraging me to improve my mind, were you not? Even although I was only a maid-servant. Indeed I understood it very well.

³⁸ Lochhead, p. 111.

³⁹ Lochhead, p. 114.

The Rights of Woman. The marvellous Mary Wollstonecraft was very keen on freedom for Woman. At least freedom for the Woman with six hundred a year and a mill-owning husband to support her - and a bevy of maid-servants sweeping and starching and giving suck to her squalling infants - not to speak of her rutting husband.

MARY *slaps her hard*.⁴⁰

The difference between this and the earlier plays is evident: as well as being the central character of the play, the central theme of the play is Mary Shelley's own artistic creativity and how that came into being; it is also about how a woman's artistic creativity is always threatened with being at the mercy of her body. In *Blood and Ice*, however, there is no simplistic equation between, for instance, childbirth and the creation of a work (as there has been in some of the fictions discussed previously). Although the connection between work of art and female body is one that has been made time and again in relation to *Frankenstein* and its author, Lochhead's engagement with it is complex and ambivalent, in a way that is belied by the simple binary opposition of the title. Silvia Mergenthal, in her essay 'The Dramatist as Reader: Liz Lochhead's Play *Blood and Ice*', wonders,

Can we [...] assume that blood and ice, in the context of the play, represent two forms of literary creativity, forms that can be described, respectively, as "bloody" autobiographical writing and as "icy" non-autobiographical writing? The first of these two forms can also be associated with emotion, the second with reason.⁴¹

Certainly there is a sense in the play in which 'blood' stands for family relationships, and the difficulties Mary has in escaping the shadow of her illustrious parents to forge her own identity as a writer. When Godwin and Wollstonecraft are being discussed at the beginning of the play by Byron and Percy, Mary insists 'I don't want to be a writer',⁴² and initially refusing to participate in their storytelling games, she (rather pompously) tells her friends: 'I do not want to write of horror, and fantasy, and sickly imaginings. My mother wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. And I am to

⁴⁰ Lochhead, p. 107.

⁴¹ Silvia Mergenthal, 'The Dramatist as Reader: Liz Lochhead's Play *Blood and Ice*' in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, ed. by Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999), pp. 96-103 (p.103).

⁴² Lochhead, p. 91.

pervert my imagination to writing foul fairy stories which do not have anything anchoring them to real life?’⁴³ In this way, the Mary of *Blood and Ice* demonstrates her awareness of her weight of heritage, and initially refuses to escape it. The connection between *Frankenstein* and her life is also made explicit in the way we meet Mary at the beginning of every scene reading *Frankenstein* and relating it to her own life (for example, introducing the scene in which William has died and Elise has been dismissed, Mary, ostensibly telling the story of her novel, narrates, ‘A child called William was killed. And a maid was unjustly accused.’⁴⁴) But Mergenthal’s simple division delimits the poetic density of Lochhead’s writing which is so suggestive as to defy adequate summary. As one might expect, the substances, blood and ice, represent themselves in the play (for instance, the blood of Mary Shelley’s birth, or of her own miscarriage; the ice that saved her from death by that miscarriage), but also serve as the basis for the symbolic taxonomy of the play, which is made up of a whole raft of apparently opposed categories battling in Mary’s consciousness: passion and reason; imagination and politics; ideals and reality; life and writing; female and male; Shelley and Byron. None of these categories, nor the divisions between them, is simply defined.

We can see the complexity of this taxonomy in the first occasion on which Mary and Claire lapse into their childhood personae:

CLAIRE Your mama died! I heard Maria tell Cook your mama died giving birth to you. Rivers of blood she said.

MARY *turns away upset, gathering at her skirt.* CLAIRE *points to MARY’S shift.*

CLAIRE Mary! Mary! What’s the matter? Mary you’re bleeding, your shift is all covered, what is it?

MARY (*coldly fascinated*) Great...gouts and spatters...crimson trickle, tickling...a thin dark red line running...scribbling as if a quill was dipped in blood and scribbled...

CLAIRE What is it? Mary! Mama! Mama! Come quick, Mary’s bleeding. Mary’s dying!

MARY *slaps CLAIRE hard.*

MARY Be quiet! It’s nothing wrong. I read about it. It’s normal. It does not hurt. Didn’t your mama tell you? [...] It’s the moon. I am a woman now. It is my age.⁴⁵

⁴³ Lochhead, p. 92.

⁴⁴ Lochhead, p. 106.

⁴⁵ Lochhead, p. 88.

Although the idea of female creativity is invoked, fairly predictably, in the feminist cliché of the image of a 'quill [...] dipped in blood', we might ascribe this, in the context of the play, to the adolescent Mary's naïve view of literary creativity. In this same passage blood also represents the very real threat of pain and death in the life of an adult woman at the time. Similarly, although blood and ice may represent (rather schematically) passion opposed to reason, or imagination opposed to politics (an opposition made by Mary in the passage quoted earlier in which she dismisses the ghost-stories that 'do not have anything anchoring them to real life'), this simple divide does not account for the more complex interaction between these categories as depicted later in the play. After Mary's miscarriage her relationship with Percy is deteriorating and they have the following exchange:

SHELLEY I saved you. It was pure instinct, the ice!

MARY ...I thought, it is my element. I swim in it and I do not die.

SHELLEY You had lost so much blood, I had never seen such...I ran, ran all the way to the Ice House, I woke Umberto, I made him pack the last shard of ice, we packed a bath of it. Claire would not help me; she said the shock would kill you, but I lifted you up in my arms and I plunged you in that bath of ice and that stopped the flow. I saved you.

MARY No baby.

SHELLEY It's my loss, too. Why is it every woman thinks she as the patent out on pain?

MARY You bleed on paper. I bled through every bit of bedlinen in this house. I lost it. I wonder, was it a boy or a girl? Or a monster. What are little girls made of? Slime and snails and...

What are monsters made of?

'I met murder on the way.
He had a mask like Castlereagh.'

(*Laughs.*) I like that one. You should have written more like that. I used to like your poetry when you were being romantic. Now I prefer the political. You put more passion into it, ultimately.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Lochhead, p. 112.

It is clear from this passage that blood and ice do not fall so unequivocally into the categories set out by Mergenthal. In the last lines of the exchange quoted above Mary praises her husband's political works above the romantic, stating in an apparent contradiction, that the former were more passionate than the latter. First of all this raises the speculation that if blood and ice refer to different kinds of writing then they could equally well stand for political and romantic writing respectively. In this case, the blood in the former could represent not only passion, but also (and less metaphorically), the blood spilt in the events that might produce political writing; here, specifically, the Peterloo massacre of 1819 which prompted Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* and from which Mary quotes in the extract above. There is a traversing of boundaries here, rather than the entrenching of them that is suggested by Mergenthal's reading; a traversing which can also be seen in Percy's yoking of 'instinct' and 'ice' at the beginning of the quotation.

Mary Shelley seems deliberately presented as inhabiting a space that is not easily categorisable. The play traces her growth from naïve adolescent who might draw her writing directly from life (the menstrual blood 'scribbling as if a quill was dipped in blood') to a mature realisation that the relationship between life and writing is a far more complex one. This is also embodied in the existence of *Frankenstein*, which is neither a political tract like *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, nor a 'foul fairy story' so despised by Mary at the beginning of the play. It binds politics and fantasy, autobiography and philosophy, and is partly about the danger of the kinds of conceptual divisions made by Mergenthal in her reading of Lochhead's play. The blood and ice of the title are figured in the play as having the capacity for good and bad, neither is privileged over the other. Byron's condemnation of Godwin's cold reason, and the chilly 'experiment' in love devised by Mary and Percy is contrasted with the ice that saves Mary's life. Similarly, the blood that may symbolise passion and the beginning of a woman's life also represents the threat of pain and death to a woman: men can write in blood, but women must escape their biology and sit down 'to quill and ink/ and icy paper.'⁴⁷

Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* was first produced at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester in 1984, and then again at the Royal Court, as part of a Howard Brenton

⁴⁷ Liz Lochhead, 'Dreaming Frankenstein' in *Dreaming Frankenstein & Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1984), p. 12. See Appendix I, p. 226.

season of 'utopia' plays. It therefore shares a political background with Ann Jellicoe's *Shelley*. Despite this (and also despite the fact that there is no evidence that Brenton was even aware of Lochhead's play, let alone either seen or read it) it shares many concerns with *Blood and Ice*, evinced by the similarities in their titles alone. They have a similar timeframe and narrative arc, beginning in idealism, and ending in tragedy (perhaps inevitably as this is provided by the biographical narrative of the Shelleys itself); *Frankenstein* serves as a metaphor for their failed hopes; and the figure of Mary Shelley even connects the deaths of her children with her husband's poetry in both plays (in *Blood and Ice* she reflects, 'I'd trade every poem ever written to be once again the mother of his sweet children.'⁴⁸ whilst in *Bloody Poetry* she rails at Percy, 'Is the price of a poem - the death of our child?'⁴⁹). Although the plays appeared independently of each other, they have more in common than do Brenton's and Jellicoe's plays, which arise from the same tradition of political theatre at the Royal Court. There is, of course, nearly a twenty-year gap between the productions of *Shelley: The Idealist* and *Bloody Poetry*, and a brief account of political theatre in the interim might go some way to explaining the differences between the two, as well as the time-lapse between the productions.

Richard Boon, in his 1991 study, *Brenton: The Playwright* gives an account of the political and theatrical background from which *Bloody Poetry* emerged. There was a view, current at the time, that political theatre flourished in the 1970s, but in the 1980s lost its way and became stagnant. The theatre of the Left in the 1970s staged large productions with big casts that sought to make sweeping social commentary, so perhaps the Shelleys' apparent failure to live a socialist utopia (and on such a small scale too) did not endear them to the dramatists on the political left at that time. However, the cutting of subsidy to fringe groups that became the norm under Thatcher's philistine regime, meant that plays had to become smaller in scale and more intimate, with what seemed to some critics a consequent softening of political edge. Boon wishes to counter this received wisdom to a certain extent, by pointing out that the assumed 'Golden Age' of political theatre in the 1970s didn't really have as much impact as its practitioners and supporters would like to think, nor did its separate elements ever really cohere into anything that could be called a movement, with a uniting force and aim. What was going on in the political theatre of the

⁴⁸ Lochhead, p. 109.

⁴⁹ Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* ([1985]London: Methuen, 1988), p. 73.

eighties (such as it was) was rather a realisation that faith in radical theatre as a real force for social change was misplaced. Boon quotes David Hare speaking: “‘The traditional function of the radical artist – ‘Look at those Borgias; look at this bureaucracy’ – has been undermined. We have looked. We have seen. We have known. And we have not changed. A pervasive cynicism paralyses public life.’”⁵⁰ Politically engaged playwrights, and artists generally, were going to have to reassess their themes and methods, and it was therefore this context from which *Bloody Poetry* emerged. The fact that it was produced in 1988 as part of a season of utopia plays is indicative of Brenton’s new attempt to frame his ideas in a more positive mode. This was brought about partly by “‘an argument with an audience after a play. ‘We know what you hate, why not show us what you love,’ they said.’”⁵¹ Thus, in the preface to the 1988 edition of the play (which was also the programme to the Royal Court production), Brenton declares ‘They [the characters in the play] were defeated, they also behaved, at times, abominably to each other. But I wrote *Bloody Poetry* to celebrate and to salute them.’ And he also makes the link between past and present explicit by stating ‘Byron, Shelley, Mary and Claire are moderns. They belong to us.’⁵²

Like *Blood and Ice*, it is a two-act play and the action covers, in the first act, the summer of 1816, with the second focusing on selected highlights from the rest of the Shelleys’ lives to illustrate the points Brenton wishes to make. Unsurprisingly, this selection, when compared with the selection made by Lochhead, illustrates the differences between the two plays. Brenton’s concern is primarily with Percy Shelley and this is shown in the appearance of Harriet as a sort of ‘chorus’, bitterly commenting on the action as it unfolds, and acting as a symbol of Percy’s guilt: after she drowns herself in the first scene of the second act, she remains a ghostly presence in the background each time Percy is on-stage. Brenton’s interest is in Percy’s philosophical views, and so it is he who takes part in the intellectual fencing-matches with Byron (rather than Mary, as in *Blood and Ice*). Percy’s affair with Claire (made explicit in *Bloody Poetry*) means the audience is drawn further into the emotional repercussions of Allegra’s adoption by Byron, than we are into those of the deaths of Mary and Percy’s children. Both Lochhead and Brenton register the impact of the

⁵⁰ Richard Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 251.

⁵¹ Robert Gore-Langton, ‘Brenton’s Erewhon’, *Plays & Players*, April 1988, pp. 10-11 (p.10).

⁵² Brenton, preface.

Peterloo massacre and the rage of Percy's poem, *The Mask of Anarchy*, although in Lochhead's play it is Mary who quotes from it, and in Brenton's, Percy. Both, however, juxtapose the political passion of the poem with the deaths of Clara and William, as part of the theme of the dichotomy between life and ideals that both plays explore. The penultimate scene features Percy alone on stage reciting from *The Mask of Anarchy*, whilst the final scene has Byron alone on stage (with the ghost of Harriet for company) speaking a bitter but triumphant eulogy over the drowned Percy's body. Richard Boon shares Brenton's view of the play, and argues that the penultimate scene is redemptive, as it affirms the continuing power of Shelley's poetry, but only if the actor playing Shelley can 'find the concentration, discipline and technique to allow Shelley's words to work with all their power and passion.'⁵³ He also argues that the optimism he detects in the play can be found in the characters of Mary and Claire who, despite undergoing a great deal of emotional laceration, 'survive and do so with a strength and tenacity which eludes the men'⁵⁴

For Sandra Tomc, in her essay "Disentangled Doom": The Politics of Celebration in Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* (1992), the position of the women characters in this play, especially Mary Shelley, is more ambivalent than this. She argues that the presence of allusions to *Frankenstein* figures Mary Shelley as a Romantic artist who yet produces a critique of Romanticism, and is therefore the site of a promising alternative to the destructive radicalism of the poets on the one hand, and the prurient conservatism of Polidori on the other. However, Tomc believes that Brenton's nerve fails him in the second act when Mary Godwin/Shelley reverts to her more conventional role of wife and mother, and her role as artist disappears amid the domestic tragedy. And indeed, in the face of this tragedy a number of critics have struggled to reconcile the celebratory tone claimed by Brenton for his play, with their understanding of the text of the play itself. Reviewers at the time pointed out how Brenton 'seeks to uncover the human face behind the epic poetry of Lord Byron and his partner in the Romantic rebellion, Percy Bysshe Shelley. A task in which he most certainly succeeds but not, one suspects, in the way he intended'; how the play 'subtly subverts its author's declared intentions'; and finally how surprising it is 'to learn from Howard Brenton's preface to *Bloody Poetry* that he wrote it to "celebrate and to salute" Shelley and Byron. For a more withering tribute it would be hard to

⁵³ Boon, p. 266.

⁵⁴ Boon, p. 266.

imagine.⁵⁵ And indeed, the women characters of the play bear the worst consequences of the men's actions: both Claire and Mary lose children, whilst Harriet becomes a prostitute⁵⁶ and kills herself. Brenton does not flinch in his depiction of their suffering. After Clara dies Mary berates Percy:

MARY [...] It was you who made me bring her to Venice.
The cruellest thing you have done to me. Impossible,
impossible journey, with a sick child –

BYSSHE There was nothing impossible about it! I drew up
a time-table! For the family, the servants, you had
only to keep to it, it was all absolutely clear! There was
no reason for anything to go wrong!

MARY You accuse me? Do you come into this hotel
room, dreary, dreary hotel room, find your daughter
dead and accuse me –

BYSSHE Yes!
You desiccated, withered bitch – yes!
He looks down

I-
Low

No, of course I do not accuse you.

MARY I am glad to hear it, for I do accuse *you*.

CLAIRE It's the grief, only the grief talking, please my
loves, do not –

MARY Accuse you. For the cruelty, pointless cruelty of
all your schemes. The endless, mad-cap journeys, in
the heat, in dirty coaches.[...] What have you achieved,
Bysshe?

BYSSHE I have written – of the Peterloo massacre. I have
written 'The Mask of Anarchy'. Let it be – a poem – for
our daughter.

MARY Oh! Can't you hear yourself? Do you know what
you're saying?
Is the price of a poem – the death of our child?⁵⁷

This powerfully unanswerable enquiry, which Percy does indeed fail to answer, is arguably more powerful than any inflection even the best actor can place on the words of Shelley's poem at the end of the play. Mary's desperate demand would still be ringing so loudly in the audience's ears as to overpower any redemptive echoes in Percy's recitation.

⁵⁵ Jack Tinker in the *Daily Mail*, Michael Billington in *The Guardian*, and Peter Kemp in *The Independent*, all from *London Theatre Record*, 8-21 April 1988, pp. 472-475.

⁵⁶ As I mentioned in Chapter 1, this is a somewhat exaggerated account of the historical facts propagated by Percy's descendants to discredit Harriet.

⁵⁷ Brenton, pp. 71-2

It is perhaps unsurprising that Brenton's play escapes its author's intentions in such a way when one takes into account the fact that it is unwittingly haunted by that other uncontrollable monster - *Frankenstein* itself. Although this is Percy and Byron's play, it is the first time that Mary Shelley has appeared in a play ostensibly about her husband, but in which her role as an artist is allowed to feature so prominently. In the first act, part of the audience's pleasure can be derived, not only from snooping about Diodati in 1816, but also from recognising the gradually snowballing allusions to the myth that must now inevitably loom behind any account of that summer. Just before the climax of Act One, when Bysshe has his vision of Mary with 'eyes in her nipples' and runs screeching from the stage, the group have been enacting the Parable of the Cave from Plato, all of them casting shadows on the wall before a bound and gagged Polidori. Percy makes a particularly large shadow, and Mary is struck by it: 'What if a shadow that we made, upon the wall of our cave - [...] Stepped down? Walked toward us? Begged - for life? [...] And we gave it life. What would it be?'.⁵⁸ She then goes on talking to herself, quoting from the novel, whilst the other characters ignore her, missing the import of her lines. This cannot be lost on the audience however, for whom Mary becomes ironically foregrounded, despite the fact that Byron begins flamboyantly reciting Coleridge. In contrast to Tomc, discussed above, Jennifer Wagner, in her more optimistic article, "'I am Cast as a Monster": Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Haunting of Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry*' (1994) ultimately sees the incursion (intentional or otherwise) made into the play by *Frankenstein* and its central ideas as more sustained and successful:

The survival of Mary's monster in Brenton's text asks us to reconsider her warning, even in the face of Percy Shelley's last stand at the end of the play. To be unable to forget the monstrousness of the poet at the end, even, or especially, in his few grandiose moments before death, seems to me a powerful legacy, and one that raises Mary here above the level of "simply" a victim.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Brenton, p. 38.

⁵⁹ Jennifer A. Wagner, "'I Am Cast as a Monster": Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Haunting of Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry*', *Modern Drama*, 37 (1994), pp. 588-602 (pp. 598-99).

In the previous chapter it was possible to see prose fictions being produced in later years that were more self-conscious and that directly addressed the break-down of the nominal borders separating biography and fiction. A similar development takes place in theatrical representations of Mary Shelley. In the same way that Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* is partly a retelling of *Frankenstein* that incorporates elements of Mary Shelley's biographical narrative, so in Autumn 2001 Forkbeard Fantasy theatre company staged their production of *Frankenstein: A Truly Monstrous Experiment*, including Mary Shelley as a character, and incorporated some familiar facts from her life. Using the company's characteristic combination of live action, film and puppetry, the play made references to the various film-versions of the novel, as well as to criticism and biography, to explore its themes of artistic and scientific creativity. Penny Saunders, the company's main puppet-designer and maker, has said in interview with *The Guardian*, "In many ways, this show is about the way we create things, about the creative process itself [...] the process of creating a theatre show is akin to creating a monster. [...] When we begin there is always the struggle to verbalise your ideas to each other, but eventually it takes shape and then suddenly it is out of control. It lives."⁶⁰ Meanwhile, in *Forkbeard Fantasy's Frankenstein: A User's Handbook*, the company explains its influences: '*Frankenstein* still governs much of today's debate about the onrushing new age of biotechnology. Many of our shows over the years have been concerned with human vanity constructing its own ultimate comeuppance, man-made creations running wildly out of control, the Unknown engulfing the Known, tinkering and tampering with the natural order of things'.⁶¹

Set in the present day, with some time-leaps to 1816 Geneva, the story of the show centres upon a literary researcher, David G. Scrivener, assistant to Professor Sailcloth, who is 'the world's leading expert on Frankenstein'. Scrivener has just stolen the fabled 'Spark of Life' (used by Victor Frankenstein in the novel to galvanise his monster) from a church in Ingolstadt, and is on his way back to England to present it to Sailcloth. However, he is waylaid by his hotelier, Count Obladio, who invites him to lunch and introduces him to a roomful of synthetic beings, past and present (a golem, a robocop, a replicant, and so on), as well as Mary Shelley herself. Obladio 'persuades Dave that, with the Spark of Life, he has superseded Sailcloth as

⁶⁰ Lyn Gardner, 'My God, we've created a monster', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2001, p. 10.

⁶¹ *Forkbeard Fantasy's Frankenstein: A User's Handbook*, programme accompanying the play, p. 4.

The World's Leading Expert on Frankenstein.[...] Dave is swept up in a whirlwind of awe and vanity and finds himself realizing the Blockbuster Movie of his childhood dreams [...] in which he not only stars as, but becomes, the great Victor Frankenstein himself.'⁶²

Dave begins to narrate the well-worn story of Mary Shelley's life in 'hushed Attenborough-with-Apes' tones,⁶³ as she appears on stage, played by a live actor, speaking into a 'mirror' - which is in fact a screen projected with pre-recorded film of the same actor. As Dave's narration continues in the background, Mary wonders what to wear for supper with Percy and Byron that night. There follows a realisation of the scene at Diodati, envisaged as a kind of Mad-Hatter's tea-party, with Mary as a bewildered and frustrated Alice. The first act ends with the creation of the monster, projected onto a screen the height of the auditorium: 'WIDE FILM of papers falling...sound of papers, pages gathering and pages blowing in and building up like a magnet drawing the flapping pages like iron filings to its slowly but surely growing human form until it is a vast and monstrous thing of flapping burbling papers lying there projected on the front screen hugely.'⁶⁴ The rest of the play in the second act is taken up with the story of the Creature pursuing Dave, having mistaken him for Frankenstein. He demands a mate, which Dave, in a sudden access of hubris, tries to make, using *Frankenstein* as a manual. The mate is made, but soon after meeting the revived Creature, it twirls off-stage and explodes. Dave has learned the error of his ways, dismissing Obladio's protests that he has reneged on his contract, by explaining that this is all invented, there was no Spark of Life, no Creature, not even Obladio himself exists and that, 'I've had enough. And Humankind shall start a new page of History. We shall ban everything that is horrid, plant pretty flowers, keep bunny rabbits and love one another. THERE ARE NO MONSTERS!!!'⁶⁵ But immediately, a cupboard bursts open behind him, releasing 'Monster No.9', a huge head, its expression frozen in a scream, taking up the whole stage and scattering the actors to the edges. So ends the play.

Saunders described Monster no. 9 as 'a modern monster and about our fear of how science is trying to tamper with nature [...] This beast is a monster experiment

⁶² *User's Handbook*, p. 2.

⁶³ Tim Britton, *Frankenstein: A Truly Monstrous Experiment*, unpublished play-script, first performed Autumn 2001, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Britton, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Britton, p. 47.

that's gone wrong, it won't survive.'⁶⁶ However, the company's targets are not only scientific, but academic and literary too. This is shown most obviously in the central character of David G. Scrivener, a representation of the ambitious and pedantic academic. His enumeration of every single adaptation or version of the original is the passport to his claim that he, and he alone, really knows *Frankenstein*, the 'great and sorely maligned tale'.⁶⁷ His *bête-noire* is

a myriad of trashy films [which] have endowed our beauteous creature with huge feet, vast hobnailed boots and a bolt thru the neck!! Insults and ignominies... outrageous plagiarizations... extraordinary distortions...Enough of these hideous plagiarizations, mockeries, travesties...the Boris Karloffs and the Hammer Horrors,... those are the monsters...the monsters of inaccuracy and distortion...Monsters.

.....Possibly the very worst, *THE* prime outrage...THE biggest of all the travesties EVER perpetrated on this great novel is the Myth of

IGOR...

[...].....who categorically *never ever ever* existed...⁶⁸

The moment Dave's apoplectic rage has ended, however, the figure of Igor appears at the door, as if to mock him, and goes on to become one of the other central characters of the play (along with Dave himself, and the revived Creature).⁶⁹ Another example of this mocking of academic/literary clichés can be found in the 'mirror' scene. As Mary Shelley brushes her hair in the 'mirror', Dave is behind the screen, narrating the story of her life in the reverential tones of the expert confiding his knowledge. Just as he has asked the portentous question, 'As she dressed for supper could she feel the tiny foetus of her creature kicking in her mind?', Mary Shelley suddenly breaks off from brushing her hair to enquire impatiently, 'Who is the voice, droning on and on and on?'⁷⁰ She enters into a dialogue with her mirror-image on the screen who complains that the owner of the droning voice is in there with her, 'In the mirror, Mary dear', and pleads with the real Mary not to leave her alone with him. This scene effectively punctures both the pomposity of the character of Scrivener himself, and

⁶⁶ *User's Handbook*, p. 18.

⁶⁷ Britton, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Britton, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Indeed, in the performance of the play I saw, such was Igor's comic charisma, he ended up being the hero of the play, as far as the audience (a large proportion of which was made up of school-pupils) was concerned.

⁷⁰ Britton, p. 14.

more specifically, the staleness of the academic cliché that compares *Frankenstein* with Mary's biological offspring.

In this 'mirror' scene we also watch her choose her clothes, and we are invited to picture the effect of her clothes upon her imagination. Her dresses hang on a moving gantry, pausing to be inspected, and as each is rejected, it 'gives a little shriek of rage'.⁷¹ Mary muses to herself: 'What shall I wear tonight? How much shall I leave uncovered, how much distorted to form a decorative creature [...]?', and as each dress passes she notes its features as if reciting from an advertisement or catalogue: 'Shall I pinch my waist with The Long Elastic Cotton Stay which obviates the necessity of lacing under the arm [...]? Shall I hussle on a Bustle? [...] or wear the Patent Elastic Spanish Lambswool Invisible Petticoat?'⁷² Thus when Mary describes how the stays create 'a Creature of Whale Bones stitched into fantasies that pretend legs do not start at the hips, nor have knees, nor pass each other in walking', the process of artificial shaping that takes place under the constraints of corsetry make the audience aware of how Mary's body was, to a certain extent, an artificial product of nineteenth-century fashion.⁷³ The fact that the dresses shriek as they are rejected reminds us of the themes of unnatural animation and artificial anatomies.

The concern with Mary Shelley as someone produced by the gender constraints of her day continues when she makes her way down to the dining room. Seated at the dining table are possibly the most bizarre incarnations of Byron and Percy seen on stage or film. Percy is represented by an actor's head thrust through a backdrop above the tiny cloth body of a puppet, whilst Byron's face is a film projected onto a convex piece of glass, making it bulge unnaturally. They are both busy composing poetry out loud, speaking at, rather than to, each other, their lack of connection or communication only emphasised by the fact that Byron is a filmed head, rather than a live actor. They are seated in a room of distorted geometry, so that Mary in her dress appears 'VAST as she passes them',⁷⁴ and when she asks where Claire and Polidori are, Percy answers 'We couldn't fit them in could we

⁷¹ Britton, p. 15.

⁷² Britton, p. 15.

⁷³ This is an interestingly novel angle on Mary Shelley's physical biography, but one unfortunately undermined by the fact that in the script each dress is described as a 'crinoline'. The exaggerated underframe of the crinoline did not come into widespread use until the 1850s, whilst high-waisted Regency fashions (which is what Mary would have been wearing in 1816), were notable for their need for much *less* elaborate corsetry.

⁷⁴ Britton, p. 16.

Lord?...someone has shrunk the capacious drawing room of the...er...Villa Bongolino...'⁷⁵ The size of Mary in comparison to the two poets is, in the words of the creators, 'to make the point that our story is about her, undwarfed by the two famous male poets.'⁷⁶ Percy and Byron are correspondingly narcissistic, with Byron literally in his own world, and Percy delighted with both himself and his lordship, neither listening to Mary, who is trying to tell them about an idea she has had:

P: [...] Mary you just can't seem to appreciate how hard it is being a *true* Artist...Being creative. It's easy for you. You're just a woman.

M: Not that old cookie.

P: Fair do's. You're talented. But not in quite the same way...there can't be anyone more pc than me...but there's a limit to all this right-on stuff...

B: Childe Harolde to the Tower Came...etc

Mary has to shout: Listen! Both of you!! Just shut up for a minute can't you?! About this Ghost Story idea. You suggested we should all come up with ideas for ghost-stories. I think I have an idea... I think it might be rather good...⁷⁷

But neither listen and she leaves frustrated. Earlier the narrator described how Mary Shelley grew up in a 'room full of deep male voices chat chat chatting about literature and a better life,'⁷⁸ and this scene with the two poets represents the continuation of that experience for Mary.

The play engages with a number of different entrenched narratives that have grown up around the figure of Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein* in both popular and academic culture. For instance, along with the figure of Igor, it borrows other elements from the various filmed versions of the novel: the crazed declaration, 'It's ALIVE!!!' from the 1931 film, as well as an angry mob of townsfolk outside Dave's hotel clammering for the casket containing the Spark of Life to be returned. At the beginning and end of the play respectively, the audience hears, 'MIGHTY LOUD 30s FILM MUSIC' and 'the scratchy end music from BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN'.⁷⁹ The play celebrates these myths through humour, and also through the creation of genuinely powerful theatrical effects - for instance the moment when the paper-

⁷⁵ Britton, p. 17.

⁷⁶ *User's Handbook*, p. 11.

⁷⁷ Britton, p. 20.

⁷⁸ Britton, p. 14.

⁷⁹ Britton, pp. 1 & 47.

creature arises on the screen at the end of Act Two. At the same time, however, the mocking humour maintains the play at an irreverent distance from its subject, so that it also comments on the processes of mythologisation that have surrounded both the stories of Mary Shelley's life and of *Frankenstein*. To this extent it shares a similar position in relation to the other plays that Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* takes in relation to the other novels: it stands outside the conventions (both of the theatre, and those of presenting the material of Mary Shelley's life and *Frankenstein*) to observe them. When Dave announces the end of monsters, he seems to represent every critic that has wished to contain *Frankenstein's* sprawling capacity for interpretation. The monster in the cupboard belies his aim, and indicates that this is one monster that will never be contained. The mere fact that that both *Poor Things* and *Frankenstein: A Truly Monstrous Experiment* engage with and deploy components of those myths for their own ends and effects, testify to the continuing power of those myths, despite their ostensibly overused trappings.

At the end of Chapter 3 I promised a more radical Mary Shelley than had so far been seen in the prose fictions, and certainly the political history of late-twentieth century British theatre, from Ann Jellicoe through to Royal Court colleague, Howard Brenton, has made a radicalised Mary Shelley almost inevitable. However, this radicalism is expressed not only in the political engagement of the later plays, but also in the treatment of Mary and Percy's final months together before his death. If this was treated at all in the novels it was usually with light reference to Percy's infatuation with Jane Williams, and Mary's jealousy as a petty, small-minded reaction. But in the case of three of the plays discussed here, this period forms the setting for a powerful scene of confrontation, in which the real consequences of Percy's idealism are explicitly stated by Mary. In Jellicoe's play she accuses him of killing Harriet, and in both Lochhead's and Brenton's plays of killing Clara and William. This forms a bleak contrast to earlier fictions which tended to idolise Percy and demonise Mary, or else ignored this difficult, decidedly unromantic time of their relationship altogether.

Despite these harsh political realities, however, the Gothic element of the story has not disappeared. It is still present, through the continuing presence of *Frankenstein* in the retelling of Mary Shelley's life-story, and even in retellings of Percy's life-story. Indeed, it seems to take over whatever it touches. Moreover, there are features of drama and theatrical performance that mean echoes of *Frankenstein*

can be heard and felt even when not directly referred to on-stage. Elma Dangerfield's main critic, Kirsten Sarna, describes how during Dangerfield's researches, the playwright 'felt during those four years that she was living with her characters more intimately than with her own family.'⁸⁰ Sarna herself argues that in the play,

Persons we are familiar with on a secondary level, by having read or heard about them are suddenly brought to life on stage in front of us, talking and acting, laughing and crying, suffering and fighting [...] For the duration of the play they become present and with them their time becomes the present. Thus Mrs Dangerfield manages to transport us through time and space into the presence of a quasi living Shelley, Byron, Mary, etc'.⁸¹

Sarna discusses *Mad Shelley* as if it were a three-dimensional biography that has brought its subjects 'to life' even more effectively than can a written text, because they are physically bodied forth for the audience. Ann Jellicoe also discusses the audience's sense that what they are watching is somehow real. Although it is an illusion that the person on stage is really Percy Shelley, or Mary Godwin, or Lord Byron, the audience of any play is in a curious double-state where they are simultaneously aware of the illusory nature of what is taking place before them, but have also willingly suspended their disbelief so that they can identify and sympathise with the characters on stage. Jellicoe describes this phenomenon, in her preface to *Shelley*, as, 'the dichotomy that is the essential theatrical experience. You identify with the actors and yet you remain yourself: "I am the Prince of Denmark yet I am also me sitting here in my seat."⁸² The illusion that the characters on stage are real is powerful enough for the audience momentarily to believe it.

Thus, in the context of Mary Shelley's biographical narrative the theatrical project of bringing the characters to life on stage, can be figured also as a Frankensteinian project, of raising the dead. Peacock makes this explicit when he argues that

one of the most awe-inspiring and, in the opinion of some, dangerous features of the theatre lies in its almost magical power of resurrecting historical personages from their

⁸⁰ Sarna, p. 18.

⁸¹ Sarna, pp. 92-3.

⁸² Jellicoe, p. 15.

graves. [...] Like a Dr. Frankenstein, the dramatist's task is ostensibly to reassemble the character from the available information in order to produce a plausibly consistent combination of physique and personality.⁸³

And the same dangers inherent in Victor Frankenstein's activities show themselves in the dramas: because the very nature of drama means that playwrights have less control over their texts and how their meanings are interpreted by actors, director and audience, means that passage of the plays through the world echoes even more closely the monster narrative of Shelley's novel (though with less drastic consequences). All of these plays (except perhaps the most recent, Forkbeard Fantasy's production of *Frankenstein*) escape the declared intentions of their authors in one way or another. Elma Dangerfield's *Mad Shelley* was a play the author wished to undermine the clichés of Shelley biography but only succeeds in entrenching them. Ann Jellicoe too seems to have failed fully to communicate the fact that 'I agree with almost every word that Shelley says,'⁸⁴ because her play is just as much about the destructive relationships he had with the women around him. The same can be said for Brenton's failed attempt to 'celebrate' the characters of *Bloody Poetry*. Even the several versions of Liz Lochhead's *Blood and Ice* bear witness to that play's failure to communicate properly the ideas conceived by its author.

Finally, the shadow of *Frankenstein* is even cast over the material of the plays themselves. I gave an example earlier how Dangerfield's play was constructed from the original biographical sources, not in order to point out how mistaken Dangerfield is, nor how she is travestyng the lives of the Shelleys. It is rather to illustrate how the creation of any kind of fictional biography can be figured as a Frankensteinian project, expressed in the huge image of a monster made from the pages of a book seen in the Forkbeard *Frankenstein*. This play, ostensibly a retelling of the novel, also shows the extent to which the biographical narrative of Mary Shelley has penetrated her fiction. This kind of mutual influence might perhaps be understandable in the work of a theatre company whose recreations of classic texts are unorthodox. But even in Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film of the novel, the main selling point of which was that (unlike all the other previous film versions) it goes back to the original text (announced by the title, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*), the life of the author seeps into

⁸³ Peacock, p. 11.

⁸⁴ Jellicoe, pp. 17-18.

the story, so that Victor's mother dies, not of scarlet fever as she does in the novel, but in childbirth, as did Mary Wollstonecraft. In the next chapter, we shall see how the first films of *Frankenstein* (especially James Whale's seminal two films of the Thirties) cast their shadow on the films featuring Mary Shelley that were made in the late 1980s.

5. The Modern Pandora: Mary Shelley on Screen.

In keeping with the growing interlacing of fiction and biography in the depiction of Mary Shelley's life, it will be possible in this chapter to detect the growing influence of the early films of *Frankenstein* (made by James Whale in the 1930s) on films about the Diodati summer made in later decades. The early films can themselves trace their lineage back further, to encompass the first ever stage-productions of *Frankenstein* (one of which Mary Shelley herself saw). If the films of *Frankenstein* are derided for over-simplifying the story of the novel, then it is only a result of the first acts of simplification that took place in these early stage-productions. In 1823, a year after Percy Shelley's death and five years after the novel's first publication, the first stage version of *Frankenstein* appeared: it was written by Richard Brinsley Peake and entitled *Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein*. To put on a production earlier than this would have invited connections with the notorious Shelley circle to be made by zealous moral critics. With Percy safely dispatched, and Mary Shelley's association with other equally notorious figures such as Byron less pronounced, the moral stage, so to speak, was set for productions of a work with such a potential for scandal. This still did not inhibit some contemporary reviewers of *Presumption* from hinting at the play's infamous lineage, and 'during the premier of *Presumption* the London Society for the Prevention of Vice protested the supposed immorality of Peake's melodrama as well as its association with the Shelley circle.'¹

These critics need not have worried. The title of Peake's production alone is enough to demonstrate how the moral complexities of the novel were translated into the 'Manichaeic world of melodrama.'² Not only was melodrama growing in popularity, but its moral certainties were highly appropriate for the presentation of the morally ambiguous *Frankenstein*. Victor became the unequivocal hero, whilst the monster was obviously the villain. This set the tone for all succeeding productions, on both stage and film. And it was not just the demands of the melodramatic form that dictated how the novel was presented on stage, but the very fact of the visual nature of its presentation: 'In *Presumption*, much as in the later films, the stress is on

¹ Steven Earl Forry, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 35. And just as in our day when a bit of controversy doesn't harm ticket sales, Forry also relates how, when the play was put on in Birmingham, the producers deliberately created their own fake protests in order to boost interest.

² Forry, p. 21.

action: the Monster and Victor square off as instant antagonists.’³ Elizabeth Nitchie, in her study of the same material, also points out that with the proliferation of stage productions over the next few years, certain conventions of staging became established, almost as a formula:

The laboratory at the top of the staircase leading from the back of the stage, with a door for the Monster to break down and a window for the frightened servant to peer through, was part of the setting for each play. There was almost invariably a cottage to be burnt. The Monster always leaped the railing of the staircase; he always seized and snapped Frankenstein’s sword; he always experienced wonder at sounds and was charmed by music. He was always nameless. He was always painted blue. These things were accepted as conventions and passed into the realm of casual allusion.⁴

We can see that several of these conventions have survived to make it on to the screen during the twentieth century. There were also elements of the novel which consistently *never* made it on to either stage or early screen versions: ‘we never see Justine and the locket that betrayed her, we never meet Walton, and no one has ever seen the monster read *Paradise Lost* or Plutarch.’⁵ The absence of Walton and Justine is presumably a result of the need to pare down the plotting to its essential elements, but the monster’s lack of reading matter is a symptom of the wider issue of his speechlessness. He was silent in the first production and carried his silence with him through the decades, well into the twentieth century. It is the monster’s very eloquence in the novel that is at the root of *Frankenstein’s* moral complexity, a complexity that simply could not be accommodated by early nineteenth-century melodramatic form. Indeed the burlesques that appeared later in the century acknowledged this limitation.⁶ In 1849, the brothers Richard and Barnabas Brough produced the burlesque, *Frankenstein; or the Model Man*, which included this aside from one of the characters to the audience:

³ Albert LaValley, ‘The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein*: A Survey’ in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. by George Levine and U.C.Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 243-289 (p. 247).

⁴ Nitchie, p. 225.

⁵ LaValley, p. 246.

⁶ One of these was written by Peake himself, who burlesqued his own *Presumption* in *Another Piece of Presumption* the very same year.

You must excuse a trifling deviation
From Mrs. Shelley's marvellous narration.
You know a piece could never hope to go on
Without love, Rivals, tyrant pa's and so on.
Therefore to let you know our altered plan,
I'm here to represent the 'nice young man,'
And in the hero's person you'll discover,
On this occasion the obnoxious lover.
So in my character I beg to say,
(*tragically*) Heigho, alas, ah me! & welladay,
And every interjection now in fashion
Indicative of wild and hopeless passion.⁷

The trend for these dramatisations died slowly towards the middle of the century, but with the advent of the medium of film, representations of Mary Shelley's novel gained fresh life, and LaValley points out how, 'there are clear lines of transmission from the nineteenth-century stage presentations to the films'.⁸

The first known film of *Frankenstein* was made in 1910 by Edison Films, starring Charles Ogle as the monster, and of which only one reel now survives. But the real history of *Frankenstein* on film begins with the landmark James Whale production of 1931, starring Boris Karloff as the monster. Bearing out LaValley's view of the connections between theatre and film, the history of Whale's film begins on stage in 1925. A stage-version of *Dracula* was written by Hamilton Deane and toured Britain successfully for two years before ending up in both London and on Broadway. A friend of Deane's, Peggy Webling, decided to write a companion piece for Deane (who also played the Count) – a stage-version of *Frankenstein*.⁹ But although the plays toured together, it was *Dracula* that enjoyed the greater success on stage, and was soon snapped up by Hollywood and filmed by Universal in 1931. Following its success Universal decided to try its luck with the companion piece, although Forry speculates that Universal only optioned it so that the stage version would not be playing in New York when the film opened (thus potentially damaging box-office receipts), rather than having any real interest in the screenplay itself.¹⁰

⁷ Forry, p. 229.

⁸ LaValley, p. 245.

⁹ Thus continuing the long association between the two myths that began with their creation at Diodati in 1816. This association is even visible in the most recent film versions, released within two years of each other, both professing to return to the original novels, as evinced in their titles: *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994).

¹⁰ Forry, p. 92. Evidence for this is that Whale's final film bears little relation to John Balderston's original screenplay.

Whatever the case, in 1931 James Whale created an icon of horror to match that of Dracula, and the success of his *Frankenstein* meant greater creative freedom with its sequel, and consequently the first screen appearance of Mary Shelley.

Whale's desire to make the connection between film and novel more explicit led to the creation of a prologue featuring Mary Godwin/Shelley, Percy and Lord Byron, to introduce his new story, *The Bride of Frankenstein*.¹¹ This scene opens appropriately enough with a clap of thunder and a shot of a storm-lashed mansion (presumably Diodati in 1816). We then cut to the grand, comfortable interior in which Lord Byron (Gavin Gordon) is making a contrast between the wilds of nature outside and 'we elegant three' within. He describes himself as 'England's greatest sinner', Percy (Douglas Walton) as 'England's greatest poet', and when Percy enquires 'What of my Mary?' Byron's face softens as he declares '*She is an angel*'. A few critics have taken the idea of Mary as an angel here at face value, and she is read as the 'sweetly domestic Mary, author in this scene of nothing more audacious than a piece of needlework.'¹² Elizabeth Young, too, in her otherwise valuable article 'Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in *The Bride of Frankenstein*' (1991), asserts that Mary Godwin's 'angelic persona serves contradictorily both to promote and to defuse her narrating powers; she occupies the important position of author, but here only as the conduit for a story passing between two men.'¹³ The fact that Young takes Mary's 'angelic persona' as a given means her reading of this scene is fundamentally lop-sided. I would argue that both Whale and Elsa Lanchester (the actress who plays both Mary and the Bride) jointly create a Mary Godwin/Shelley that in fact lampoons Byron's (and possibly the audience's) assumption that she is angelic.¹⁴

After Byron has told us that Mary is an angel, we cut to Lanchester as Mary, accompanied by some delicate string-music on the soundtrack. She enquires archly,

¹¹ See Gregory William Mank, *It's Alive!: The Classic Cinema Saga of Frankenstein* (San Diego: A.S. Barnes, 1981), pp. 50 & 52.

¹² Ramona M. Ralston and Sid Sondergard, 'Biodepictions of Mary Shelley: The Romantic Woman Artist as Mother of Monsters' in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, ed. by Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999), pp. 201-213 (p. 203).

¹³ Elizabeth Young, 'Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in *Bride of Frankenstein*', *Feminist Studies*, 17 (1991), 403-437 (pp. 407-8).

¹⁴ These views also do not take into account the film culture of the 1930s in which women, far from being wilting and submissive characters, were much more likely to be prized as intelligent and articulate figures, able to hold their own in very masculine company. See Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

'You think so?', which is immediately followed by a clap of thunder from outside. Lanchester is made up so that although her face looks sweet and dimpled, her eyes are heavily shadowed and eyebrows arched so that whatever apparent 'angelic' qualities are there (and which Byron refers to repeatedly throughout the scene), they are constantly undercut by anomalies in her appearance and in the way Lanchester plays the character. The clap of thunder in this case is an explicit direction to the audience that there is more to Mary than the angel Byron speaks of. Speaking of the making of the film many years later Lanchester recalled: 'James's feeling was that very pretty, sweet people, both men and women, had very wicked insides...evil thoughts [...] So James wanted the same actress for both parts to show that the Bride of Frankenstein did after all, come out of the sweet Mary Shelley's soul.'¹⁵ The 'angelic persona' Young writes of is not in fact something we find in the character of Mary Godwin herself, but something that the character of Byron attempts to impose on her: he looks at her in wonder and exclaims, 'Astonishing creature!', and later he muses, 'Can you believe that bland and lovely brow conceived of *Frankenstein*?' But as a result of Whale's vision and his directing we have a Mary Godwin/Shelley that continually slips through Byron's fingers: in response to his query she replies simply, 'What do you expect? Such an audience needs something stronger than a pretty little love story. So, why shouldn't I write of monsters?' Here she is presented, not as a gentle angel, but a practical, jobbing author catering to the needs of her audience. Ralston and Sondergard rather unconvincingly describe the two men 'teasing' her about her unpublished work.¹⁶ The critics neglect to mention the fact that Mary responds with the certainty: 'It *will* be published.' If she behaves submissively, it forms part of her control of her own persona. With Percy she simpers 'Can you light these candles for me?', whilst to Byron, when he gazes at her and wonders 'Astonishing creature!' she responds 'Aye, Lord Byron?'; with her sidelong glances and coquettish manner, we can see her flirting with him. Far from being a 'conduit' or 'a passive reflector of the wit of her male companions', she is in fact the central figure of this scene.¹⁷ Percy is a rather wispy character, and Byron a camp caricature, who we see consistently fail in his attempts to enclose Mary within his own easy categorisations.

¹⁵ Mank, p. 55.

¹⁶ Ralston and Sondergard, p. 203.

¹⁷ Ralston and Sondergard, p. 203.

This is not to say, however, that the film itself escapes the allure of these attractive contradictions between angelic appearance and demonic 'reality'. As mentioned above, it was Whale's express intention to show 'how pretty people actually inside have very wicked thoughts' and it is this apparent contradiction that lends the opening scene of *The Bride of Frankenstein* its dramatic energy. The idea that a woman is behind one of the most powerful monster-myths to have been created in recent years, and a woman who appears in all other respects 'normal' is seen as one of the most uncanny aspects of the story of *Frankenstein*. However, her assertion in this scene that in *Frankenstein* she wished to create 'a moral lesson' does not support the view we are supposed to form of the sinister workings of her imagination. Byron rides rough-shod over this explanation of her novel: 'Well, whatever your purpose may have been my dear, I take great relish in savouring each separate horror! I roll them over on my tongue[...]', and emphasises instead its purely horrific elements. Mary Godwin/Shelley is therefore a figure who is misunderstood and reduced by those around her. Byron revels in the idea of a pretty girl creating a monstrous work of fiction, but shows himself to have rather missed the point. We are shown in this brief scene the false allure that this discrepancy creates.

The apparent delicious contradiction between exterior and interior in the character of Mary Shelley is a theme that proves impossible to resist for many subsequent filmmakers. The next time she appears on screen, in Ken Russell's *Gothic* in 1986, the same contrasts are noted. As envisioned by Ken Russell and the screenwriter, Stephen Volk, the night of ghost-stories at Diodati becomes the orgiastic riot of horror, sex and drugs that every gossipmonger of the time, and probably since, has dreamed of. To show how this night itself (as well as the works it spawned) has passed into legend, the film is bookended with two scenes that depict the creation and perpetuation of the Diodati story. The film opens with tourists of 1816 staying across the lake from Diodati, trying to catch a glimpse of scandalous activity through their telescope, while the final scene depicts a modern day heritage-tour of Diodati, the guide telling the story of the Romantics' stay there, their lives now having passed into legend. The story that takes place between these two scenes is a depiction of the aforementioned night, the pivotal points of which are the ghost-story competition (here suggested not by Byron, but by Claire), and a séance they hold to 'conjure up their darkest fears'. The film has already started out darkly with the help of Thomas

Dolby's melodramatic soundtrack and Gabriel Byrne's performance as a leering, intimidating Byron. The atmosphere is one of mounting hysteria, as each of the group in turn confronts their demons in a house that may or may not actually be haunted. Are the demons real, ones they have actually conjured with their séance, or are they simply hallucinations produced by too much laudanum? The issue remains ambiguous for both characters and audience.

The sight the tourists are jostling for a glimpse of in that first scene is nothing more scandalous than Polidori (Timothy Spall) at a window of Diodati, watching the arrival of Mary (Natasha Richardson), Percy (Julian Sands) and Claire (Myriam Cyr) in a rowing boat at the shore of the villa. As Percy scrambles out of the boat he is pursued by two squealing girls, sensation-seekers who grab him by his jacket (in a familiar Ken Russell trope that figures Romantic artists as prototypical rock-stars). He discards the jacket, escaping them, and capers off up the lawn. Claire scampers after him, collecting the jacket on her way, whilst the two 'fans' are chased off the premises by two large dogs (presumably belonging to Byron). It has begun to rain, and Mary trudges after them, carrying the luggage. Thus, the relationships between the three are quickly sketched in: Percy is the charismatic star, and Claire's relationship to him is close to that of an adoring fan (she gets the jacket the other two anonymous girls have failed to nab), and they are both the naughty, pleasure-seeking children to the mother-figure and responsibility-bearer who is Mary Godwin. This relationship is expanded and sustained over the course of the film, Claire and Percy giving themselves up willingly to the horrors of the night, happy to be stage-managed by Byron, while Mary is reluctant and wary of the aristocrat's arrogance and imperiousness. The character of Mary Godwin paradoxically becomes the centre of the film through her very quietness and modesty – in contrast to the others' flamboyance and extroversion, she becomes the focus of interest. She is pretty, mentally fragile, and sensitive, in a way that forms a contrast with the violence of the visions she has, which are produced by a combination of laudanum, the séance, and her own dreams. As in *The Bride of Frankenstein* we are presented with a discrepancy between Mary Godwin's visible demeanour and her thoughts.

There is no such discrepancy in the case of the other characters because they are all acting (in every sense) so bizarrely, that we expect their internal world as it comes to light in the film to be odd, unsettling and macabre. Myriam Cyr and Timothy Spall deliver the two most overwrought performances, with their physical

characteristics – prominent eyes and, in Cyr’s case, an enormous halo of frizzy dark hair – adding to the general air of insanity. Byrne and Sands are a little more naturalistic, and Richardson as Mary Godwin is the most restrained. Although, in the context of the film, Mary’s visions are not particularly shocking, they constitute a striking contrast to her persona. As I mentioned earlier, Mary Godwin here is a mother-figure, a role which is developed and sustained over the narrative, both literally and figuratively. She plays the responsible parent to Claire and Percy, but she is also the actual mother of both William and of her first, nameless child, born prematurely the year before and who died two weeks later. We learn of this just after Byron has demanded that they hold a séance to ‘conjure up all your ghosts’. Mary feels hot and faint and is taken from the room by Polidori who listens while she reveals why she fears a séance: she tells him about her dead little girl and concludes, ‘My fear, doctor, is that I would give anything to bring that child back to life again.’

As well as forming a contrast to her disturbing hallucinations, the figure of Mary Godwin/Shelley as mother signals a Mary Godwin/Shelley who is also the mother of her text. One of the central tropes of the film is that of raising the dead, and using the fact that the audience will know about her authorship of *Frankenstein*, Volk and Russell implicitly make the connection between her failed motherhood and her own story of raising the dead. This connection is threaded through the film. After their first eerie experiences, each character retires to their respective rooms. Hung in Mary’s room is ‘The Nightmare’, Henry Fuseli’s famous painting of a woman draped sleeping across a bed, with an incubus perched on her chest.¹⁸ Mary falls asleep gazing at this picture and has her own version of the ‘Nightmare’: we see the demon’s taloned hand speculatively caressing her neck and she wakes with a cry to find that Claire has fallen asleep across her body, creating the pressure that woke her. She removes Claire, who wakes up and tells Mary that she is pregnant. Thus Claire, brimming with new life, becomes a monstrous burden to her step-sister whose experience of parturition thus far in her life has primarily been one of horror and disappointment.

We encounter the idea of monstrous motherhood again at the climax of the film, when Byron, Percy and Claire hold a second séance in an attempt to counter the effects of the first. Mary interrupts it and smashes the skull which they have been

¹⁸ And which is also said to have been visual inspiration for the scene in the 1931 *Frankenstein* in which Elizabeth is left for dead by the monster.

using, and they are thrown to different corners of the room with great power (clearly unleashed by Mary's intervention). She flees in terror, only to have a series of nightmarish hallucinations/visions in which she foresees the deaths of William, Allegra, Polidori, Byron, and Shelley. She also has visions of herself giving birth, and of herself reading in bed (or writing, it is not completely clear which) beside a cot containing two baby-corpses. This last inevitably implies a causal connection between Mary Godwin/Shelley's intellectual activity and the deaths of her babies. After this series of hallucinations we see Mary, half-crazed by what she has seen, running through Diodati to end up perched on a balcony about to jump off. She is saved by Percy and she falls into disjointed ramblings: 'No, no, don't stop me. I can change it, I saw myself there in the future. But if I die now, it will all be different, and nothing will happen.' She clearly feels responsible for the deaths she has witnessed. Percy finally manages to calm her, and reassures 'The storm is over', meaning literally the storm raging outside the house has ended, but also that Mary's stormy dreams are over, as well as their night of horrors. Percy's reaction is to dissuade her of her guilt, and in this context the dreams can be seen to express a particularly female anxiety and guilt at her acts of creation. These visions are precisely that: they are not real and in the context of the film they are products of Mary's own consciousness.

In 1988 (and possibly as a result of increased interest in the Diodati story in the film industry as a result of Russell's film) two more Mary Shelley films were released, one based on Anne Edwards' *Haunted Summer* and the other, *Rowing with the Wind*, a Spanish production in English, written and directed by Gonzalo Suarez. Both films envision Diodati as a key scene in this narrative, but where it takes up the whole narrative in *Haunted Summer*, in *Rowing with the Wind* it is the starting point to a narrative which has a very similar timeframe to Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* (and with which it shares others lines of influence). The timeframe of *Haunted Summer* is the same as that of Edwards' novel, but without the authenticating device of Mary Shelley's prologue and explanation for the story. The tight structure demanded in a screenplay also makes the narrative more streamlined (although it gets off to a slow start due to extensive scene-setting and character establishment). It opens with Mary (Alice Krige), Percy (Eric Stoltz) and Claire (Laura Dern) travelling through the Alps to Switzerland. By the time they get to Lake Geneva they are tired of staying at cheap

inns, and Percy concedes to the girls' wish to stay at in the much plusher Hotel D'Angleterre (where Byron [Phillip Anglim] is also a guest). Through Claire, Byron invites them to lunch, where he and Percy talk politics and revolution whilst the women and Polidori (Alex Winter) are near silent onlookers. When Mary speaks, Byron decides to needle her, attempting to construct her as a prudish blue-stocking.

It is in this atmosphere that they all move to Chappuis and Diodati, Byron taking on the role of master of the revels, showing the others round Diodati and his possessions. He reveals new acquisitions such as a boat, and a painting - Fuseli's 'The Nightmare' - and introduces Percy to smoking opium (but takes the pipe away, saying, 'I wouldn't want to be responsible for any addiction'). He takes them to Chillon and asks Percy to take part in an experiment that will prove him the winner in their philosophical disputes:

You say that evil does not exist in the world, save that which man creates. And I say that it exists as part of the duality of creation. [...] You will smoke [opium]....and then take the precious object of your most tender affections, Mary the good, Mary the loving...and view her in that dimension of other seeing. If she does not change, well, then you are right. But if you glimpse the demon behind the mask, then I am right.

Unsurprisingly, under Byron's direction ('Look at the smile, does it not grow demonic?') Percy does indeed glimpse the demon behind Mary's mask and collapses into a hysterical fit, whilst a concerned Mary and Claire look on in horror. Mary confronts Byron about this later and wonders why he is trying 'to drive a wedge between Shelley and me', and he replies 'Perhaps to make room for myself.' In the light of an earlier scene in which we see him seducing the vulnerable and besotted Polidori, the audience might assume that Byron means to seduce Percy too. But we learn rather that, 'You are the most unique creature I have ever met, and so beautiful. I give you fair warning. I mean to pursue you with every weapon at my command.' Mary meanwhile is visibly melting, but manages to resist, and escapes to Percy, to whom she makes love, in what appears to be an act of deferred desire.

Their second visit to the castle later in the film is as a result of Mary's orchestration: in the interim we have seen Byron grow increasingly cruel to the pregnant Claire, and hopeless Polidori (whom Mary has befriended). Her

'experiment' is thus framed as an act of revenge on the wicked Lord and designed to give him a taste of his own medicine: they all (including her) smoke opium, but she makes Byron smoke more than the others and seems to induce the appearance of a mysterious, monstrous figure in the dungeon with them. 'It seeks you Albé', intones Mary, as the figure approaches Byron, who kisses it before running in terror from the castle. After the night of horrors Byron wakes in a bed in the Shelleys' cottage and Mary brings the groggy patient breakfast. While she explains the events of the previous evening, she seems seductive, and when it transpires that she stage-managed everything with the help of Polidori, Byron seems to slip further into her power. She explains that Polidori put an extra drug in the pipe and rigged it so that she inhaled almost none of the smoke, whilst Byron became hallucinatory. The figure she seemed to conjure into existence was actually Polidori in a rubber mask. She advises him coquettishly, 'You couldn't summon monsters and play Magus without taking your turn.' He in turn reveals his own feelings in response to the charade: 'It was more than the terror. It was the monster's great longing and sadness. And I knew it was me.' He and Mary then fall into a passionate embrace.

Ralston and Sondergard argue that *Haunted Summer* is yet another film narrative in which Mary Shelley is made to relinquish control over her own text in deference to the superior intellects of the male Romantics around her (they argue this about all her film incarnations). Where this is true of Anne Edwards' novel, the narrative of Edwards' text is changed in several crucial ways so that, conversely, the Mary Shelley of the film has greater control and agency than she does in the book. To begin with, the story of *Frankenstein* is not suggested by any ghost-story competition invented by Byron, but is a result of her own volition (this is one of the few fictional narratives that does *not* contain some allusion to the 'competition'). True, the story is inspired both by the figure of Byron himself, and by his conversations with Percy, but this inspiration does not become a schematic explanation of the origins of her novel. Mary Godwin is seen to take the primary elements of her inspiration and instead of setting them down on paper as they are, and, in a visual emblem of how she moulds them into a novel (as the image of someone writing a novel is not especially visually engaging), also creates the performed fiction that so terrifies Byron at Chillon. Unlike Claire and Percy, who accept Byron's influence unquestioningly, and thus become prey to his manipulation, Mary is shown to use it both for her own creative purposes, but also feeds it back to him in acts of retaliation.

It is in this capacity that she is also seen to be in control of her sexual feelings for Byron: where, in the novel, she succumbs to his overpowering sexuality in the manner of any romance heroine, in the film she decides when to initiate their physical relationship. She is seen to be the only character who manages to 'tame' the devil incarnate, Byron. Where other film-Byrons are attractive villains, here, although handsome, he is unambiguously nasty and manipulative. He mocks Mary, alternately seduces and rejects Polidori, forbids Claire any access to her child, and makes Percy fear Mary through his exhortation to 'glimpse the demon behind the mask'. In her protectiveness towards the other characters she can, to a certain extent, be seen, as she was in *Gothic*, as a mother figure. For instance, Ralston and Sondergard argue that even her sexuality is a maternal one: 'Her love-making with both Percy and Byron [...] expresses her compassion rather than her desire, her bare skin is scarcely glimpsed, her calm radiance beatified by the camera.'¹⁹ However, this does not take into account the fact that she makes love with Percy directly after her near-seduction by Byron and this can be seen therefore as an act of deferred desire, especially in view of the fact that she initiates it with her plea, 'Love me, Shelley'. What the critics describe as 'her calm radiance beatified by the camera' is in fact a visual echo of the earlier scene in which Percy hallucinates a monstrous Mary: her head is backlit so it appears haloed, but with her face in shadow, and as such renders her a threatening as well as seductive figure. Where the 'maternal cast' to her love-making is difficult to detect in this scene, it is certainly more perceptible in her physical relationship with Byron. As it comes in response to his despairing realisation that he *is* the monster, it could therefore be conceivably described as an 'act of compassion'. However, along with her use of the psychological experiment used by him to manipulate Percy, it could also be seen as a calculated use of one of Byron's tools against him, and therefore the act of an avenging angel. As he has made those who love him vulnerable to his charms, and used them for his own pleasures, she is using her knowledge of how Byron feels about her to control him.

Haunted Summer is similar to the other film depictions in that it too makes use of the discrepancy between appearance and reality to drive the characterisation of Mary Shelley. However, as in *Bride of Frankenstein* it is a false discrepancy, created by Byron and ultimately shown to be meaningless. It is the result of Byron's view of

¹⁹ Ralston and Sondergard, p. 208.

the universe, divided unproblematically into good and evil, and both Mary Shelley and by association, her novel, fall into the simplistic categories of his world: she is monstrous because she is about to produce (the audience knows) a book about a monster. But as we and Byron go on to learn, things are not as simple as this: the monster is sad, and he is that monster. Mary has produced a moral tale, rather than a horror-story, and so whatever frisson there might be in the idea of 'Mary the good, Mary the loving' actually being demonic, dissipates in the face of the complexities of reality.

In the same year, Gonzalo Suarez's *Rowing with the Wind* (also known as *Remando al Viento* in Spanish) appeared. It displays two main strands of influence: as I mentioned earlier, its timeframe is similar to that of Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry*, running from the elopement of 1814 (which is telescoped with the summer of 1816) to Percy's death. The influence of the Brenton production can also be seen in the casting: Valentine Pelka, who plays Percy in the film, also played him in the first production of Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* in Leicester in 1984, whilst Lizzy McInnerny (Mary) played Claire in the Royal Court production in 1988.²⁰ The other strand of influence is Russell's *Gothic*. Suarez takes the central scene of the earlier film as the starting point for his own life story of the Shelleys. *Rowing with the Wind* starts with the Diodati house party, and takes the final scenes of *Gothic* literally, so that where Mary deludedly thought that she was responsible for the deaths of her companions and has to be brought to her senses by Percy, in Suarez's film her act of writing literally brings the monster to life, who then haunts the family and its satellites, so that Mary becomes indirectly responsible for the deaths of Polidori, William, Allegra, and Shelley.

The explanation for this connection between life and work is the familiar trope of childbirth and creativity. Byron's (Hugh Grant) idle meditation 'Do you know what the finest poem would be? It would be the poem that gave life to matter by force of imagination alone', produces the reaction from Mary, 'That would be horrible'. This establishes the ominous atmosphere which is deepened later in the scene when Claire (Elizabeth Hurley) enquires, 'What are you thinking about Mary?', and her sister replies 'About Byron and his poem – the one nobody has written yet. Where the

²⁰ Obviously, as this is the release date of the film, she must have worked on the film before appearing in the play, but the lines of influence still hold.

imagination could give life to matter making it into a living poem – just as fire can revive dead wood.’ Leaving aside any doubts the audience may have about Mary’s peculiar belief that fire can revive dead wood, we can see that ideas about artistic creativity, and the creation of life are beginning to brew in her mind. The link between artistic and biological creation is cemented in Claire’s indignant response: ‘How obstinate they are! Why do men try to create life out of death when women know perfectly well that life can create life?’ Claire is clearly thinking of her own pregnancy here, but when Mary goes on in the course of the film both to create her own children, and to write a monster into being, it is as if her biological ability somehow infects all her activities, so that by writing she also brings to life, in a way that no man can. The poem that Byron dreams of in the film can only, of necessity, be written by a woman.

There are other parallels drawn between her character and that of Victor Frankenstein. Their resemblance is signalled by her similar relation to the monster: when he first appears it is in a dissolve from a shot of her face to one of his, thus implying a *doppelgänger* relationship between them. This is also one of several allusions to the 1931 *Frankenstein*: it echoes the sequence towards the end of the film when shots of Frankenstein’s and the monster’s face are rapidly alternated implying a doubled connection between them. As the monster kills off Victor’s family in the novel, so the monster in *Rowing with the Wind* works his way through Mary’s loved ones. However, his motives are unclear, unlike in the novel; there is no apparent rage or thirst for revenge against his creator: he seems simply born to slay. In this, *Rowing with the Wind* shows its precursors to be cinematic and visual rather than literary: by making the monster motivelessly malign, it engages in the same kind of moral simplification to be found in the earliest stage productions, and which filtered through to the earliest films of the novel. Suarez also references James Whale’s 1931 *Frankenstein* in the scenes between the monster and little William: they both take place beside water, the first in which the monster warns the boy that he will see him in Venice, the second beside a lagoon in that city. The monster appears by William sailing his boat, and, looming ominously over the boy, tells him, ‘Now we are in Venice. Can you swim?’. The next shot is of William being carried dead from the pond. In Whale’s version, the monster is seen playing with a little girl by a lake, and a few shots later we see her distraught father carrying her through the crowds celebrating Victor and Elizabeth’s wedding. Thus film representations of Mary

Shelley's life and work have, in *Rowing with the Wind* (and in a similar way that happens in dramatic productions) intermeshed completely. Where in *Gothic* Mary believes she is guilty of the deaths of her loved ones and has to be persuaded of her innocence by Percy, the characters and narrative of *Rowing with the Wind* simply affirm this guilt. Towards the end of the film, after Mary's confession to Byron of what she believes she has done, he intones 'Since you have had the power to write our destiny, you must have the courage to accept it.' The implication is that in 'writing [their] destiny' she has assumed the same godlike mantle as Victor Frankenstein himself, and is being roundly punished for her presumption.

The interlacing of life and work that begins to be more pronounced in *Rowing with the Wind* is taken further in Roger Corman's adaptation of Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990). In Aldiss's novel the events of *Frankenstein* are presented as occurring at the time that Mary Godwin was staying at Diodati in 1816, but where in the novel she is unaware of these events, in Corman's film she is entirely *au fait* with them. Indeed we first meet her as a spectator at the trial of Justine Moritz, thus rendering her, as Ralston and Sondergard put it, an 'investigative reporter' and *Frankenstein* is thus reduced to a piece of journalism.²¹ Where in *Rowing with the Wind* she and her monster exist in the same universe because she has created him, in *Frankenstein Unbound* Mary Godwin (played by Bridget Fonda) simply happens to be alive at the same time as him, having had no hand in his creation ('Then it's true...Dr. Frankenstein has created a man!' she gasps). She has slipped one degree further away from autonomous creation, and instead we find her more or less transcribing events as they happen. Ostensibly (and certainly in comparison to her portrayal in the other films) she is an independent and well-educated woman, even a feminist: she attends the trial of Justine alone, and remarks to Joseph Buchanan (the renamed Joseph Bodenland from Aldiss's novel, played by John Hurt), 'She's accused of killing William Frankenstein, who was six. She lacks the physical strength necessary to commit the crime, so of course she's accused of witchcraft. It's a travesty.' Here she demonstrates her knowledge of local judicial custom, as well as distancing herself from it by indicating that obviously the world in which she lives has moved on from these primitive and oppressive beliefs. The world she is from, we

²¹ Ralston and Sondergard, p. 209.

assume, is urbane and sophisticated, characteristics which are also indicated in the fact that she is also extremely well-dressed. However, in this, and in her seduction of Buchanan ('Percy and Byron preach free love. I practise it. '), we see the limits of her agency within the film. As well as merely taking down and reproducing what is going on under her nose, Mary Godwin is stripped of creative power by the presence of Buchanan who takes great satisfaction in showing her a copy of her book, which has, of course as far as he is concerned, already been published. When she points out in a somewhat bemused and irritated manner that she's only just started writing the thing, Buchanan proudly informs her that not only will it be published and read, but it will introduce 'a new word to every language on earth... "Frankenstein"' Oddly, by pronouncing this himself, Buchanan appropriates the act of innovation from her. 'How does it end?' she asks eagerly when she sees it, thus willingly relinquishing further any claim to authorship of her own text. Yet again we see the problematic creativity of Mary Shelley made manageable by explaining it out of existence. In the earlier years of her critical assessment this was a common practice: in Mario Praz's (in)famous opinion, all Mary Shelley did was to 'provide a passive reflection of some of the wild fantasies which, as it were, hung in the air about her.'²² What we see in Corman's film is the three-dimensional realisation of this critical view.

As we move through the film portraits of Mary Shelley, her life and work become ever more entangled, so that by the time we arrive at the most recent (Corman's 1990 film) events from both fiction and biography exist on the same plane of reality. I argued at the beginning of this chapter that Mary Shelley on film (unlike her portrayal in text-based media) has always been associated with her own work first and foremost, and her more famous associates secondarily. In *The Bride of Frankenstein*, for instance, there is limited reference made to the events of her life and *Frankenstein* is seen to arise solely from Mary's imagination: it is not inspired by the characters of Byron or Percy, or any competition suggested by them, or from horror at her children's deaths. The more entangled fiction and biography become, readings of her life and work increase in ingenuity, but each becomes increasingly subjected to the other: *Frankenstein* becomes autobiography, and her life simply an echo of the events of the novel. In the most recent of her celluloid portrayals artistic control over her

²² Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* ([1933] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 116.

work has been wrested from her almost entirely, and her visible appearance as an angel has reached its apotheosis: played by Bridget Fonda with a mass of blonde ringlets. This process is the reverse of her character's development in novels and drama, in which later portraits have notably more power, autonomy and imagination than the earlier ones.

So, why should this be the case specifically in film portraits of Mary Shelley? The most obvious source for an answer to this question would appear to rest in the primarily visual nature of film: Mary Shelley begins to be constructed through her visual image. As I have pointed out during this chapter, the discrepancy between her physical appearance and her mental attributes is drawn repeatedly in these films. This discrepancy is in fact quite common in film portrayals of women and is discussed from various angles by Laura Mulvey in her collection of essays, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989). She shows how in, for example, Jean Luc Godard's films, 'female beauty is a mask that conceals deceit and danger.'²³ This, argues Mulvey, is a result of Godard's 'romantic heritage in which woman is divided into an appearance that can be enjoyed and an essence that is only knowable at risk, deceptive and dangerous.'²⁴ Thus, in *Haunted Summer*, just before Percy is about to embark on Byron's experiment of looking at Mary under the influence of opium, he affirms, 'viewing Mary is one of the great joys of my life. This can do nothing but enhance that pleasure.' Byron, as we have seen, is intent on revealing the 'demon' behind Mary's mask to the naïve Percy. In this the two men enact Mulvey's theory, which is exemplified by Godard's view of women. Mulvey argues that this way of portraying women in film can be seen as an expression of the myth of Pandora: the gifted, beautiful woman created by the gods of Greek myth to punish Prometheus for his presumption. Her beauty belies her deceit, by which she releases from her box (in the original myth a large urn) all the evils of the world. Mulvey observes how, 'The box and its motif of inside/outside, echoes the motif of Pandora's exterior beauty/interior duplicity.'²⁵

When applied to the context of the film-portraits of Mary Shelley this idea becomes powerfully resonant. In this scheme she is constructed as a Pandora-figure in all but one of the films: in *The Bride of Frankenstein* she is portrayed as a demonic

²³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. x.

²⁴ Mulvey, p. 51.

²⁵ Mulvey, p. xi.

angel who is also the purveyor of a 'moral lesson'; where in *Gothic* she only imagines herself as the Pandora figure, who hallucinates the deaths of her loved ones (caused by her writing), in *Rowing with the Wind* her creation of *Frankenstein* releases the force that kills her children in *fact*; in *Haunted Summer* she attracts Byron in order to deceive him, in an act that punishes him for his arrogance. In creating a powerfully uncontainable myth in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley (as imagined visually) can herself be construed in the terms of another myth. However, through the lenses of these films her construction as Pandora becomes gradually more powerful, so that (in the same confusion that elides creator and monster in the popular imagination) *Frankenstein* ends up being presented as the *source* of the evils released into the world rather than an expression of a warning against them. The film-portraits ostensibly increase in complexity and emotional realism as they bring in more details from actual biographical narratives. However, the construction of both Mary Shelley and her novel in fact become more simplified and cartoon-like as the Pandora-myth generated by the essentially visual nature of the medium becomes ever more pronounced.

6. Mother of her Text: Representations of Mary Shelley in 'Non-Fiction', Poetry, Opera, Hypertext, and Radio.

The collection of genres and media discussed in this chapter is varied, but as the works to be discussed were all produced in the last thirty-five years, they nevertheless possess a certain amount of thematic consistency. Erica Jong's collection of poetry, *Loveroot* (1968) is chronologically the first of these fictions, but also sets the tone for the texts that follow. Produced at the inception of the new women's movement, Jong's poetry sets out to 'rescue' Mary Shelley from literary obscurity, thus beginning the trend for her presentation as a feminist heroine. The image that nearly all of the texts in this chapter have in common (with the important exception of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* [1995]) is the image of childbirth as a metaphor for artistic creativity (seen intermittently in previous chapters), and the development of this metaphor can be traced from Jong's early use of it, to the most recent, in Sally Beamish's opera, *Monster* (2002).

'NON-FICTION'

If, as I pointed out in Chapter Three, many fictions featuring Mary Shelley are written partially in order to explain the genesis of *Frankenstein* then Barbara Lynne Devlin's *I Am Mary Shelley* (1977) is the ultimate explanation - ultimate because of its claim to be fact, rather than informed speculation, or imaginative reconstruction. It is her account of her experiences as part of a community of reincarnation researchers based in California in the 1970s. Here she discovers that she has actually been Mary Shelley in one of her former lifetimes, and thus her account has a claim (albeit tenuous) to be non-fiction. Where other writers have occasionally literalised certain critical views of *Frankenstein* in their fictional rewritings of its author's life - say, that Mary Shelley 'conceived' it with the help of Percy, or that she brought to life a destructive force in writing it - Devlin takes this process of literalisation one step further and claims her story to be true *in fact*. Unfortunately, whatever the reader's beliefs regarding reincarnation, there are too many errors and misreadings in Devlin's assessment of *Frankenstein* alone to credit what she presents as true (hence its inclusion here as a fictional text).

As she and her fellow researchers find out more about their previous lives, they find that they have been others of Mary's circle: Byron, Percy, Claire, and so on. Devlin's mentor, Marcia Moore, explains that 'If some members of the group get together [...] others will follow. They're like people bailing out of an airplane into the jungle and then groping through that jungle trying to find each other.'¹ They also find that 1816 Switzerland and 1970s California are not the only times that this group of 'soul-essences' has gathered. They have also been together for instance, as members of Robin Hood's band in medieval England, and later, in the fifteenth century, two of the men have been the 'princes in the tower' and Devlin was their child-lover, Margaret.² So, among Devlin's other identities are: Thomasina, a minstrel in Robin Hood's gang; Lara, a laboratory assistant in Atlantis, whose master, Ra-Nang, fails in his project to make the perfect man, and tears his creation into pieces; Maryam, a disciple of Jesus; and George, a merchant seaman.

What other writers would frame as imaginative speculation, Devlin openly declares to be the truth. For instance, she claims to correct various misconceptions in the biographical narrative of Mary Shelley: 'By the way, to set historians straight, I never, never, never had an affair with Polidori. He was a nice fellow who needed someone to talk to, as did I.'³ Conversely, she confirms with her first-hand knowledge: 'Shelley didn't look like his pictures. The historians say the woman who painted the best-known portrait of him was a bad artist. They're right.'⁴ She also makes fine adjustments to more tenuous pieces of knowledge, for example Radu Florescu's claim that it was Mary Shelley's visit to Castle Frankenstein on her boat trip down the Rhine that inspired her novel. Devlin/Mary Shelley generously concedes: 'Yes, I visited Castle Frankenstein but if it had not been for Byron and his proposal that we all tell ghost stories, I would never have written my book. The castle itself, and the legend, meant little to me. Mr. Florescu wonders why I made no mention of the place in my journal; that is why. It did not affect me at all.'⁵ Through her privileged position, party to the innermost thoughts of the writer, Devlin can

¹ Barbara Lynne Devlin, *I Am Mary Shelley* (New York: Condor, 1977), p. 219.

² This also explains how Mary Shelley came to write *Perkin Warbeck*, the story of the pretender to Edward VII's throne, who claimed to be Richard, one of the princes said to have been killed in the tower.

³ Devlin, p. 21.

⁴ Devlin, p. 21.

⁵ Devlin, p. 26.

affirm everything she claims simply by invoking this 'fact': 'I know Mary's heart - after all, it was mine.'⁶

However, as I mentioned earlier, this is undermined by some profound misunderstandings of Mary Shelley's life and work. For instance, Devlin feels she must find out why Mary began *Frankenstein* with 'four lengthy, rambling letters, having virtually nothing to do with the plot - letters expressing the emotions of a whaler who is at most a minor character in the book'.⁷ Unable to perceive the crucial relationship between Walton (whom she mistakenly calls a 'businessman' and a 'whaler') and Victor in the novel, Devlin finds it necessary to explain the presence of his sea adventures in some other way. She argues that Mary Shelley had no experience of the sea, and she was a bad sailor. This is true as far as it goes, but Devlin seems unaware of the fact that as well as crossing the channel, Mary had travelled by boat from London to Dundee, and spent several years as a teenager living near this busy port. If Devlin had actually been Mary Shelley, she should have known this (and even if everything Devlin knew about her had been gleaned from biographies, this information would have been available at the time she was writing). But as she seems unaware of this, she explains Walton's presence in *Frankenstein* as being Mary Shelley's unconscious memories of her time as George, the merchant seaman.

From her position of privileged insight, Devlin also dismisses the notion that the novel expresses a 'birth trauma':

Birth trauma indeed! [...] To my way of thinking it is far more reasonable to believe she was putting into words her own subconscious memories of Lara's reaction to Ra-Nang's monster than to espouse such preposterous Freudian notion as 'birth trauma.'⁸

Whatever readers may think of Ellen Moers' reading of *Frankenstein* as a 'birth myth', it is not easily refuted by arguing that the novel was in fact inspired by Mary's previous existence in the kingdom of Atlantis. It is perhaps inevitable that the presence of so many phenomena in Mary Shelley's biographical narrative with potentially supernatural explanations, should attract those interested in supernatural or

⁶ Devlin, p. 267.

⁷ Devlin, pp. 78-9.

⁸ Devlin, p. 267.

spiritual phenomena. The time described in this book – the early 1970s – interest had grown in Eastern religions as a spiritual alternative to what were regarded as the stale monotheisms of the West. Devlin declares herself ‘a devotee of yoga and metaphysics, but, unlike many of my colleagues, I have never been tempted to embrace Eastern religions.’⁹ Although she describes herself as a Christian, it is expressed through her ‘fundamentalist’s intense love for the man Jesus’, rather than more conventional forms of religious worship. Her view of *Frankenstein* confirms this:

I believe that Victor Frankenstein represents not God, but the Church. [...] The creator’s inability to feel even the slightest affection for the creature he has brought into the world leads to the destruction of everyone he loves. Similarly, the Church’s lack of compassion for the sinners whom Christ loved, and was sent to save, has warped and twisted human nature.¹⁰

Mary Shelley thus becomes the ideal vehicle for the spiritual self-discovery common around this time. Devlin describes her first encounter with Boris Karloff’s incarnation as the monster, and remembers how, ‘For no apparent reason, I hated it. It wasn’t at all like the book, I insisted, even though at that time I had not even read the book.’¹¹ Thus, Mary Shelley also comes to represent a superior artist misunderstood and exploited by the structures of Western capitalist society. Devlin’s text finds its place in the context of the counterculture of the 1960s, coupled with the feminism of the 1970s which alighted on Mary Shelley as one of the lost figures of women’s literary history.

POETRY

Mary Shelley is also configured as one of the lost women of literary history, somewhat more convincingly, in the two sequences of poetry she inspired. Erica Jong’s poems, entitled ‘Dear Marys, Dear Mother, Dear Daughter’, appeared at the inception of the modern women’s movement in 1968 and bear many of the hallmarks of their historical context. Liz Lochhead’s poems were published in the collection,

⁹ Devlin, p. 7.

¹⁰ Devlin, p. 264.

¹¹ Devlin, p. 7.

Dreaming Frankenstein, in 1984, and consequently avoid some of the clichés that emerged in the early days of the women's movement.

Jong's poems take part in the search for literary foremothers that was pursued by many feminist writers during the first decade and a half or so of the women's movement. In the same year that Jong's poems were published, Margaret Atwood found inspiration for her poetry in *Frankenstein*, and wrote a feminist reworking of the story in poetry. In the collection, *The Animals in That Country* (1968), she included a sequence of 'Speeches for Dr Frankenstein' addressed by Frankenstein to the monster, which foregrounded the creator's narcissism and cruelty. This marks the beginning of Mary Shelley's adoption by the new feminism, a process to which Devlin contributed with *I Am Mary Shelley*.

Many of Jong's poems in *Loveroot* (the collection containing 'Dear Marys...') are addressed to other writers, dead and living, male and female, some of whom she knows personally, and Jong's concern with naming all of these as influences, along with the opening words of the collection ('I, Erica Jong [...]') all suggest a search for and an assertion of identity.¹² This theme is strengthened when the subjects of some of Jong's homages are noted: Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, Keats, and Walt Whitman. The opening of the first poem in the collection, 'Testament (Or, Homage to Walt Whitman)' is a deliberate echo of Whitman's 'Song of Myself': 'I, Erica Jong, in the midst of my life,/having had two parents, two sisters,/ two husbands, two books of poems/ & three decades of pain,/ [...] declare myself now for joy.'¹³ Mary Shelley and Keats are obviously late Romantics, whilst Keats and Whitman could comfortably be described as poets of the self. Thus Jong signals her interests – in the self, in her identity, her role as a poet, and her relation as poet to the rest of the world. In the series of poems 'Dear Marys, Dear Mother, Dear Daughter', Mary Shelley also becomes part of Jong's exploration of her literary ancestors, as well as part of an investigation into the nature of the mother/daughter relationship.

The first poem in the series is entitled 'Needlepoint' and signals its subject matter in the first line: 'Mothers & daughters...'.¹⁴ Jong's mother, Eda Mirsky, was

¹² Erica Jong, *Loveroot* ([1968] London: Secker & Warburg, 1977), p. 3. The full text of the poems discussed in this section can be found in Appendix I. All references to these poems will be by title and line number.

¹³ *Loveroot*, p. 3.

¹⁴ 'Needlepoint', 1. The ampersand is used throughout the collection in place of 'and'.

an artist,¹⁵ and in the poem Jong watches her sewing, and reflects on the connections between her mother's and her own art. She compares her mother's needlework first (obliquely) to birthing her daughter: 'She pushes the needle/ in & out/ as she once pushed me', then shifts the simile into a metaphor so that she becomes the needle, 'embroidering her faults/ in prose & poetry,/ writing the fiction/ of my bitterness'.¹⁶ The metaphor reverts to a more biological note towards the end of the poem, when the narrator concludes:

[...] this twisted skein
of multicolored wool,
this dappled canvas
or this page of print
joins us
like the twisted purple cord
through which we first pulsed poems.¹⁷

Thus the link between biology and creativity, by now familiar from much of the critical discussion and fictional discourse surrounding Mary Shelley's own creativity, is thoroughly established in Jong's poem. There is also the link between creative mothers and daughters, which is explored further in the next poem, 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley'. First of all this title continues the use of names by Jong as assertion of identity, and the deliberate usage of, in each case, the name of the husband and father of each woman as her 'full' name, also signals Jong's concern with the relationships between the women and the men in their lives. The poem begins with an evocation of the moment of Mary Shelley's birth, 'killing her mother/ with a stubborn afterbirth - / the medium they'd shared....'.¹⁸ But although the allusion also harks back to the previous poem's evocation of the relationship between Jong and her mother, the death of Mary Wollstonecraft is painted by Jong as something heroic, a martyrdom even, and her suffering is something Mary Shelley inherits:

[...] & baby Mary screamed.

She grew up

¹⁵ *Dictionary of Literary Biography, 152: American Novelists since World War Two* (4th series), ed. by James R. Giles & Wanda H. Giles (Detroit: Gale, 1995), p. 100.

¹⁶ 'Needlepoint', 13-16.

¹⁷ 'Needlepoint', 39-45.

¹⁸ 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 5-7.

To marry Shelley,
Have four babes
(of whom three died) -
& one immortal monster.¹⁹

The creation of that monster is a result of her experience of subordination to the men (Byron and Shelley) who 'strutted near the lake' and had the women to copy their manuscripts and bear their children. And, she concludes, 'Doctor Frankenstein/ was punished/ for his pride:/ the hubris of a man/ creating life.' Jong draws the connection closer still in the next verse when she wonders 'Who were these gothic monsters?/ Merely men.'²⁰ Thus Victor Frankenstein is a collation of the arrogant men in Mary Shelley's life, who attempt to emulate her ability to give birth, but fail. The final verse seems to be a bitter complaint on the plight of women at that time:

Dear Marys,
it was clear
that you were truer.
Daughters of daughters,
mothers of future mothers,
you sought to soar
beyond complaints
of woman's lot -
& died in childbirth
for the Rights of Man.²¹

Although the women 'sought to soar', they could not escape the confines of their biology, and end continuing the race of men, for men. However, in laying so much significance on the biological biography of the two women, Jong appears to throw the cultural baby out with the biological bathwater. She seems to be saying that because the women suffered terribly, physically, it undermined and negated whatever they produced intellectually: *Vindication* had no lasting effect, because Wollstonecraft died in childbirth, and neither did *Frankenstein* because 'Shelley praised the book/ but missed the point'.²² All the glory went to the hypocritical men: Byron 'with his Mistress Fame' and Shelley 'the seaman/ who had never learned to swim'.²³ This reading seems to take no account of the lasting impact of either of the two women's

¹⁹ 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 10.

²⁰ 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 17, 31-34, & 40-41.

²¹ 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 48.

²² 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 38.

²³ 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 47.

texts – lasting impact proved in the fact that Jong is writing from the very midst of a new wave of feminism built on previous generations' efforts. She denies Mary Shelley the power of intellectual creation in her yoking together of her babies and her monster: she 'had' the monster, whilst the men around her 'wrote their poems/ on purest alpine air'.²⁴ Shelley's novel is no longer a text, but becomes a body, a biological entity, sprung fully-formed to life, rather than from conscious effort. Thus Jong denies Shelley what she herself acknowledges in a later article (discussed below), that 'literary creativity is sheer hard labor, quite different from the growing of a baby in the womb, which goes on despite one's conscious will'.²⁵

Jong's vision in this poem is ultimately a pessimistic one that belies her opening declaration of herself 'for joy.' When Jong uses the metaphor that allies the women's biology and their intellect so closely, she is engaging in a centuries-old pursuit which renders her view of their creativity ambivalent. The metaphorical linking of childbirth and creativity has always been an undertaking fraught with problems, for both male and female writers. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, in her essay 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse' (1989) the metaphor shifts significance depending on whether a male or a female writer is employing it. When used by men, the discrepancy between the two activities of creative endeavour and parturition – the fundamental difference which is also the source of the metaphor's power – is highlighted to such an extent that it 'paradoxically beckons woman toward the community of creative artists by focusing on what she alone can create, but then subtly excludes her as the historically resonant associations of the metaphor reinforce the separation of creativities into mind and body, man and woman.'²⁶ On the other hand, argues Friedman, when used by women, 'instead of contributing to the reification of Western culture, the female metaphor expresses a fundamental rebellion against it. It represents a defiance of historical realities and a symbolic reunion of mind and body, creation and procreation.'²⁷ In addition, because of the reader's awareness of the woman's biological ability to give

²⁴ 'Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin & Mary Godwin Shelley', 18.

²⁵ Erica Jong, 'Creativity vs. Generativity: The Unexamined Lie', *The New Republic*, 13 January 1979, pp. 27-30 (p. 27).

²⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse' in *Speaking of Gender*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 73-100 (p. 94).

²⁷ Friedman, p. 80.

birth the metaphor simply works more effectively when used by a woman writer. The female use of the metaphor has not, however, always been unambiguously positive, and Friedman accordingly sets up a 'sliding scale': 'At one end of the continuum, women's birth metaphors express a fundamental acceptance of a masculinist aesthetic that separates creativity and procreativity. At the other end of the continuum is a defiant celebration of (pro)creation, a gynocentric aesthetic based on the body.'²⁸ Friedman places Jong in the ambivalent middle of this continuum, which 'leads her to embrace and then reject the metaphor, a wavering that suggests her awareness of the metaphor's double potential for regression and liberation.'²⁹

It is in the 'Dear Marys' series of poems that we see her embracing the metaphor, in her whole-hearted application of it both to her own relationship with her artist-mother and to Mary Shelley's relationship to her work. However, the connection between biological and literary creativity, although embraced, is seen as having a wholly negative outcome: creation and procreation preclude each other. But as Friedman notes, Jong's attitude to the metaphor changes once she has herself experienced pregnancy and birth. These attitudes she expresses in a 1979 essay, 'Creativity vs. Generativity: The Unexamined Lie.' In this she releases her hostility to the metaphor: 'Only a man (or a woman who had never been pregnant) would compare creativity to maternity, pregnancy to the creation of a poem or novel. The comparison is by now a conventional metaphor [...] but it is also thoroughly inexact.'³⁰ Friedman observes that 'underlying her resistance to the metaphor is both anger and fear [...] she fears that pregnancy will sabotage her creative drive.'³¹ As far as this goes, this is correct, but in closing her remarks on Jong in this way Friedman chooses to disregard the important fact that the poet eventually realises through her experience of pregnancy and birth that this fear is entirely unwarranted. On the contrary, she discovers that,

I never felt sick or lacked energy. I worked as hard at my writing as I ever had in my life – and, in fact, worked with greater consistency. I wrote a number of poems, [and] continued to toil productively at the novel I had begun a year before becoming pregnant [...] Whatever pregnancy

²⁸ Friedman, p. 86.

²⁹ Friedman, p. 88.

³⁰ Jong, *The New Republic*, p. 27.

³¹ Friedman, p. 89.

‘fulfilled’ in me (and I do not underestimate that fulfilment at all), it was a wholly different order of fulfilment from the one I seek through my creative work.³²

She has found what she once thought to be true and expressed in ‘Dear Marys’ – that physical creation destroys and negates intellectual – to be untrue. Obviously, as Jong acknowledges later in the article, this creative energy is largely possible because she lives in a society in which it is possible for women to work and have children. So where does this leave Mary Shelley in the Jongian scheme? When Jong turns away from ‘the romantic infatuation with death, the worship of poetic suicides, the idealization of poets who [...] died as martyrs to woman’s lot,’³³ she correspondingly leaves Mary Shelley floundering in the Romantic mire. In the larger scheme of this chapter, however, this demonstration of the early adoption and then subsequent abandonment of Mary Shelley as a feminist heroine is useful. As we shall see in her later incarnations (especially in Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*) Mary Shelley is re-recruited to the feminist cause, and in her fictional form serves as much as anything else as a barometer of change in contemporary feminist thinking.

Liz Lochhead has already been discussed in Chapter 4 as a dramatist, and she now appears here in her capacity as a poet. The collection *Dreaming Frankenstein* was published in 1984, the same year as the production of *Blood and Ice* discussed earlier, and displays some of the same concerns. Notably, a series of poems inspired by both Mary Shelley’s life and *Frankenstein* itself: ‘Dreaming Frankenstein’, ‘What the Creature Said’, and ‘Smirnoff for Karloff’. The first is a re-imagining of the waking dream that inspired *Frankenstein*, and described by Shelley in the 1831 Introduction to the novel. The next two, ‘What the Creature Said’ and ‘Smirnoff for Karloff’ are more concerned with the mythology of *Frankenstein* and the monster.³⁴ In ‘Dreaming Frankenstein’ Lochhead takes the setting of Mary Shelley’s introduction – her bedroom, in the middle of the night – as the key to her re-imagining, re-making the waking dream as a sexual moment: the moment of creation envisioned also as a moment of procreation. Other dominant images, though, are speech and its lack, especially in the first verse-paragraph, with the first line – ‘She said she’ –

³² Jong, *The New Republic*, p. 28.

³³ Jong, *The New Republic*, p. 28.

³⁴ Liz Lochhead, *Dreaming Frankenstein & Collected Poems* ([1984] Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000), pp. 11-15.

immediately establishing Mary Shelley as the origin of this story, but also simultaneously calling that origin into doubt by the qualification that 'She said'. Lochhead is implying that she might not be telling the truth, but also that what we are hearing is being mediated through the consciousness of Mary Shelley herself. A few lines later she is dumbfounded: 'Her mother-tongue clung to her mouth's roof/ in terror, dumbfounding her, and he came with a name/ that was none of her making.'³⁵ These lines emphasise the element in Mary Shelley's own account of her lack of agency and control: she is 'possessed' 'haunted', she 'could not be said to think', and finally she 'finds' the story.³⁶

In her poem, Lochhead literalises the idea of Shelley's story being outside her by personifying it: it becomes a midnight visitor that leaves 'a ton-weight sensation,/ the marks fading visibly where/ his buttons had bit into her and/ the rough serge of his suiting had chafed her sex [...].'³⁷ The dominant tone of the description of this visitor is violent, as can be seen from the lines just quoted – 'bit into her', 'rough serge...chafed' – as is the description of the girl's (for Mary Shelley is not named in the poem) reaction: 'Anyway/ he was inside her/ and getting him out again/ would be agony fit to quarter her,/ unstitching everything.'³⁸ Here, the paradox that he has left, but also 'entered her utterly' is expanded, so that she has been entered both by her visitor and the creation he has left which will now have to be removed with great pain.³⁹ We have now moved on to the familiar analogy between childbirth and artistic creativity. The associated analogy – that the monster itself is Mary Shelley's artistic creation – can also be seen in the phrase 'unstitching everything', though paradoxically here the creative act is seen as something that unmakes and dismantles, rather than its opposite: in the creation of her own monster, Mary Shelley has somehow left herself in pieces with the effort. After this, the final verse-paragraph forms a contrast, as 'in the reasonable sun of morning,/ she dressed in damped muslin/ and sat down to quill and ink/ and icy paper.'⁴⁰ Lochhead was aware of Mary Shelley's family background and its roots in eighteenth-century Reason: 'I was haunted by that phrase from Goya: "The sleep of reason produces monsters." If you try to force things to be too rational the dark and untidy bits will well up and manifest

³⁵ 'Dreaming Frankenstein', 4.

³⁶ Shelley, p. 172.

³⁷ 'Dreaming Frankenstein', 21.

³⁸ 'Dreaming Frankenstein', 31.

³⁹ 'Dreaming Frankenstein', 26.

⁴⁰ 'Dreaming Frankenstein', 37.

themselves in quite concrete ways.’⁴¹ Here, Lochhead is speaking about her play *Blood and Ice*, but in the context of the final paragraph of her poem, can equally be applied to ‘Dreaming Frankenstein’ which ultimately draws contrasts between night and day, dream and reality, involuntary and voluntary creation. With her ‘Eyes on those high peaks’ Shelley sits down the next morning to make something rational and controlled of her visceral, unconscious, unwilled experiences of the night. Thus Lochhead’s vision in this poem is of *Frankenstein* explained as the irruption of a too-efficiently repressed emotion in Mary Shelley’s thoroughly reasonable upbringing. However, it is also a variation on, even arguably a reversal of the creativity/childbirth metaphor: it is the moment of conception that is envisioned as the visceral, biological event, imagined as a literal conception. The act of creation, however, is a fully controlled and intellectual event, an act of work.

The sexualisation of the monster also occurs in the third poem of the series, ‘Smirnoff for Karloff’ in which the creator of the monster (the identity of the narrator is never made more specific than this) addresses his/her creation in a tone which is simultaneously wisecracking and sinister. The monster addressed is clearly the Karloff incarnation: ‘in your funeral suit/[...]With the too short drainpipe trousers/with the brothelcreeper boots.’⁴² Although the narrator is seemingly genderless, there are hints at a sexual relationship between the two that gather strength over the course of the poem:

Going to let you roly-pole all over me.
 [...]
 his five straight limbs.
 [...]
 What wouldn’t you
 give to love me?
 [...]
 going to put you to the test,
 make you give your all six
 nights per week and on Sundays
 going to take the rest
 [...]
 Ain’t going to let nothing come between
 My monster and me.⁴³

⁴¹ Gillean Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson, eds., *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 13.

⁴² ‘Smirnoff for Karloff’, 19.

⁴³ ‘Smirnoff for Karloff’, 18, 35, 39, 45, 67.

It is intriguing to note that this intimation at a physical relationship between creator and monster becomes much more explicit in the hypertext discussed below, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), in which Mary Shelley creates a female monster and has an affair with her. This kind of sexualisation bypasses the childbirth metaphor altogether, or at least renders the supposed parental relationship between creator and creation incestuous.

Although these two poets are clearly very different, their common subject matter inevitably means they have some concerns in common. It could be said, that where Jong abandons Mary Shelley in her striving for more positive models, Lochhead rescues her and acknowledges what Jong refused to in her schematisation of the Romantics: the 'sheer hard labor' involved in creative work. The relation between biology and intellect (if there indeed is one) has been acknowledged as more subtle and complex than the dichotomy envisioned by Jong.

OPERA

There have been two operas produced about the 1816 summer: in Richard Meale and David Malouf's 1991 opera, *Mer de Glace*, Mary Shelley becomes a character in what is essentially Claire Clairmont's story, while Sally Beamish and Janice Galloway's *Monster* (2002), is concerned with the process of creation that led to *Frankenstein* in the days between the setting of the 'competition' and Mary Shelley's flash of inspiration.

The main setting of *Mer de Glace* is Diodati in 1816, but the narrative also merges with parts of the story of *Frankenstein*. It is framed by scenes of an elderly Claire in Florence in the 1870s (she died in 1879) and opens with Claire reminiscing before her death, being summoned back to the past by the ghosts of her youth. Byron is remembering, 'Claire Clairmont - I knew her once - ', Percy beckoning, 'Lie here by me, lie here, lie here', while Mary, on the other hand, repels her: 'No, Claire, not here. Shelley is mine now, he is mine. Keep off, Claire, keep off.'⁴⁴ The narrative moves back in time to Switzerland in 1816. The Shelleys are part of a tour-group observing Mont Blanc, and a counterpoint is established between the religious awe of the guide and the tourists, and the 'blasphemous' attitudes of the three Romantics.

⁴⁴ David Malouf, *Mer de Glace* (opera libretto, score by Richard Meale) (Sydney: Boosey & Hawkes [Australia], 1991), p. 26.

Percy recites his own poem, while Mary and Claire proclaim their adherence to liberty and free love. The first scene of Act One shows Byron's arrival and establishes Claire's relationship with him, while the second depicts the central story-telling scene. It is raining, they are bored, and we see a familiar characterisation of Mary as the impatient mother to Claire and Percy's playful children: 'Shelley, if you can't sing anything decent, be quiet. It's bad enough that we should be shut up here. And Claire, stop mooning!'.⁴⁵ Claire and Percy decide to play-act the sinister story of William and Lenore,⁴⁶ by the end of which Claire is genuinely frightened. She implores Mary and Polidori, 'Make him stop. Make him, Mary. Byron, Polidori, he's changing the words.'⁴⁷

In the next scene, in the same way that Claire has been driven to the edge of terror by Percy, Mary has her half-waking dream in response to his lullaby: 'No, Shelley, don't make me. Ahhh... I see, I see, I see.'⁴⁸ She then recounts her vision in familiar, and also some not so familiar, terms. She describes how the monster begins to move, and exclaims,

Oh, the pain of it! Oh the pain of it!
 This first beat of life, this steady beating as the great engine throbs,
 [...]
 Oh the pain! To give birth to yourself, my dear one,
 is such pain, such pain. To feel the self stirring, feeding, growing,
 turning head over heel through the centuries [...].⁴⁹

The childbirth metaphor is clearly invoked here in a now familiar figuring of the creation of *Frankenstein*. Less well-worn though, is Mary's description of the monster:

Now the glacier in its veins has begun to shift.
 It is moving out to the edge of the light. It is
 melting, it is melting.
 Spring has come to a cold star, Shelley,

⁴⁵ Malouf, p. 32.

⁴⁶ William and Lenore are sweethearts and William a soldier who does not return from the war. While Lenore is grieving he appears on horseback and invites her to join him: 'The wedding room's prepared,/ And made is our wedding bed [...] Far off, but cool and light, it's six/ Feet long and two feet broad.' As they travel he reveals himself as the skeletal figure of death, at which point Percy directly addresses Claire 'And now my dear, are you afraid?' and insists that she answer him.

⁴⁷ Malouf, p. 34.

⁴⁸ Malouf, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Malouf, p. 35.

to the knot of solid ice that was its heart.⁵⁰

In the context of the imagery of the rest of the opera, this is clearly an allusion to Mont Blanc that had so impressed them at the beginning. The mountain has, unusually, been figured as one of Mary's inspirations in the creation of her story. In the opening prologue she sang, 'One would think it was some sleepy animal, Mont Blanc,/ and the frozen blood for ever crawling/ in its stony veins. If I should wake! If I should wake it!'⁵¹ Mary Shelley is here envisaged as an almost god-like figure who, in creating *Frankenstein* has performed an act as momentous as waking a mountain or melting a glacier. As Mary dreams, Percy shifts identities between his own and that of Victor Frankenstein. The act ends with Percy fully transformed: 'I am Frankenstein, the great Prometheus, the great darer, the creator, the definer, maker and breaker of laws.'⁵² The final scenes of the act begin to narrate the story of *Frankenstein*: the monster (who is also Byron) encounters some children playing, and inadvertently frightens one of them, William, to death; later he espies dancing villagers who chase him away with pitchforks. Bathing his wounds in a pool, the monster catches sight of his reflection and realises his status as an outcast. At the end of the act, Frankenstein (Percy) comes to his own realisation that the creature he created has caused the death of his own brother, who is carried on to the stage.

Although the monster can speak (or rather sing), there are various elements of his and the story's presentation that seem to hark back to the films, and earlier to the first stage productions. The villagers and their pitchforks, as well as the scene in which the dead William is carried on to the stage echo scenes from the 1931 *Frankenstein*, while the monster's fascination and delight at the dancing of the children, and later with the villagers, with whom we find him 'dancing to himself and wordlessly singing his own song.'⁵³ seems to conform to the convention, noted by Elizabeth Nitchie, that 'he always experienced wonder at sounds and was charmed by music'⁵⁴

Act Two opens with Mary continuing the narrative of *Frankenstein*. The monster asks Victor for a mate, and the latter laments his fate. Implicit in this lament

⁵⁰ Malouf, p. 35.

⁵¹ Malouf, p. 27.

⁵² Malouf, p. 36.

⁵³ Malouf, p. 37.

⁵⁴ Nitchie, p. 225.

must be his refusal to make the mate, because the next scene depicts Elizabeth and Victor's wedding and the monster's intervention. Claire as Elizabeth is entranced by the monster (Byron) and moves towards his arms, and at his embrace she faints. The *Frankenstein* narrative fades into the background as Polidori examines Claire and announces her pregnancy. The final scene depicts Percy having just returned from his negotiations with Byron over the child and attempting to convince Claire: 'You will go back to England. The child will be born in secret. He will support it - you see, I said he was generous.'⁵⁵ Claire is understandably incredulous and disillusioned. She sings:

I wanted
to be free. What power
did I have? What power
does any of us have? Sleepwalkers -
that's what you want, you men!
Shelley, am I to have
no life of my own, ever, ever? Will it always be
someone else's story?⁵⁶

The opera ends in the same setting with which it began, Claire as an old lady, with the others disappearing into the shadows, as she sings, 'I am here, still living, still hanging on to breath. Byron, where is my child? Shelley, where is she?'

The fact that Claire's final words are a question, and the setting is the same as that with which the opera began emphasises the circularity of the narrative. This is a structural expression of what is also one of the main themes of the opera, which is (as they all sing together towards the end of the final scene) 'The same story told again and again [...] The same story finding new lives, new voices,/ The one thread winding again and again.'⁵⁷ Thus Claire and Percy's story of William and Lenore, and Mary's of *Frankenstein* are presented as retellings of ancient stories, and in retelling the stories of Mary, Claire, Byron, Percy, and Polidori, as well as that of *Frankenstein* the opera itself becomes part of this cycle of story-telling. Moreover, as can be seen from Claire's final aria, the narratives of the lives of the characters are figured as stories created as they are lived. So when in Act One, Scene Two, Claire complains that Percy is changing the words of the story of William and Lenore, David Malouf, the

⁵⁵ Malouf, p. 43.

⁵⁶ Malouf, p. 43.

⁵⁷ Malouf, p. 44.

librettist, identifies this an example of how ‘Shelley manipulates her to make her into a character in a story - his story. One of the recurring themes of the work is how you must prevent yourself becoming just another character in someone else’s story, and come to occupy the centre of your own story.’⁵⁸ In this scheme, the opera can thus be seen to be about Claire’s failure to occupy the centre of her own story, and conversely, Mary’s success at telling the story of her life. If Liz Lochhead’s *Blood and Ice* was set in the consciousness of Mary Shelley, then *Mer de Glace*, as figured by its authors, is set in Claire’s. Thus in the aria quoted above, she sees Byron’s appropriation of her child and Shelley’s complicity in this, as representing her submission to someone else’s narrative: the child becomes a symbol of her (life-) story. She seems to rally and resist their attempt to control her when she sings ‘No, no, it’s time to wake up [...] I am not for drowning./ No forests, no regions dim. I want to live/ in the light!’⁵⁹ But her final poignant question, ‘where is my child?’ ultimately belies this positive determination.

On the other hand, Mary, as the creator and narrator of the story that drives the whole opera, can be seen as the obverse of Claire, as one who is very much in control of her narrative. It is through these structural elements of the opera - her relationships with the other characters and her place within the narrative as a whole - rather than through the language of the piece, that the most coherent construction of Mary Shelley’s character emerges. Verbally, she comes across as something of a negative presence: pushing Claire away from herself and Percy; sharply reprimanding them; urging Claire, apparently unsympathetically to ‘Answer him [Shelley], answer him’, when she is at the height of her terror of Percy in the second scene of the opera. This certainly chimes with the role assigned her by Malouf who says that the story of William and Lenore ‘is a prefiguration of the role that Claire will be forced into by the men, and also Mary.’⁶⁰ In their afterwords to the opera, neither Malouf nor Meale mentions Mary in any other context than this, hence she seems to be seen by them as simply another of the elements that constrains Claire. Thus, when she begins to create *Frankenstein*, there has been no indication, other than that provided by the audience’s prior knowledge, that this is her role in the opera. Malouf and Meale seem to disregard her role as creator of *Frankenstein* in the opera, which renders her character

⁵⁸ Malouf, p. 48.

⁵⁹ Malouf, p. 43

⁶⁰ Malouf, p. 48.

far more important to the themes and structure of the work than is implied in their assessment.

Although in the 'creation' scene she and Percy seem jointly to create the story from her dream, she is presented as the sole narrator of the story as it unfolds, and therefore, as Claire became part of Percy's story which he controlled earlier in the opera, so Mary's companions become characters in her story. Percy, earlier seen as the arch-manipulator, appropriately becomes Victor Frankenstein, Claire becomes Elizabeth, one of the many female victims in *Frankenstein*, and Byron, the monster, destroyer of Claire/Elizabeth and an outcast of society. There is no equivalence drawn between Mary and any of the characters in her novel, which only emphasises her presence as controlling force outside the story. Furthermore, as each vignette from *Frankenstein* fades back into the reality of Diodati in 1816, it echoes the earlier transition from Claire and Percy's joint recital of the William and Lenore poem in which Percy seemed unable to distinguish fiction and reality. In particular, at the end of Act Two, Scene One, Percy as Frankenstein becomes afraid and starts calling for Mary: 'Mary, where am I? Ah - la Mer... La Mer de Glace! Where are you Mary?'. As the scene changes back to the interior of the Diodati, she appears and reassures him, 'Here, Shelley, here. [...] It is just a story. Look, we are here. You're safe. It's over for tonight.'⁶¹ Mary is in the same position that Percy had been in the earlier scene: taking him to the edge of fear and confusion, just as he drove Claire to faint in terror. In the cycle of story-telling taking place in *Mer de Glace*, Mary is the dominant story-teller, and the one to whom the others eventually defer. At the end Percy demands 'How does it end, Mary? End it, Mary!', but she can offer no comforting closure:

No there is no end,
there never could be.
Out there on the edge of reality, on the sea of ice,
they pursue one another for ever. For ever.⁶²

Both Mary's story and Claire's quest for her lost child remain unresolved at the end of the opera, drawing a parallel between the two activities: the never-ending cycle of birth and death, and the endless telling and re-telling of stories. This is a parallel that

⁶¹ Malouf, p. 40.

⁶² Malouf, p. 44.

has been expressed earlier in Mary's 'creation' aria when she describes 'the self stirring, feeding, growing, turning head over heel through centuries' (quoted above). The metaphor frames the endless cycle of story-making as a centuries-old pursuit that gathers its energy from past stories, and thus emphasises the role of intertextuality in the creation of *Frankenstein*. This chimes with Meale's view which is that, 'Although something is reiterated, it is still new and has its rightful place. [...] Works will haunt each other, but there's a new way of seeing things.'⁶³

The libretto of Sally Beamish's *Monster* (2002) by Janice Galloway also places us in familiar territory. This is the territory, wider than that presented in *Mer de Glace*, marked out by Lochhead's *Blood and Ice* and Brenton's *Bloody Poetry*. The opera has a similar period of Mary Shelley's life as its main setting, and as in Lochhead's play and *Mer de Glace*, the use of flashback is a dominant narrative technique. Where Lochhead and Malouf flash back to 1816, however, *Monster* uses 1816 itself as the starting point for a series of flashbacks to Mary's early life: her few days of writer's block between the announcement of the ghost-story competition and her waking dream of inspiration is taken up with memories of her life. Thus, her relationship with her parents, dead and alive, her stay in Scotland, the birth and death of her first baby, and the intermittent appearance of an invented character, the scientist Monsieur Frankpierre, are all seen to contribute to the closing line 'I had my story.'⁶⁴ The opera is divided into two acts, of twelve and thirteen scenes apiece, the first opening on the Villa Diodati and the announcement of the ghost-story competition. It then flashes back to the Godwin household and establishes the intellectual environment in which Mary Shelley grew up – the Lambs and Coleridge are regular visitors, and the latter plays the role of a kind of godparent to Mary. Relations between Mary and her stepfamily are strained, so when the opportunity arises to live for a while in Scotland without them, she is delighted. She returns and meets Percy, and the act ends with the elopement of the couple with Jane Clairmont (as she is known throughout the opera), and Godwin's horror. The second act covers their travels in 1814, their return to London and their money problems and finally,

⁶³ Malouf, p. 49.

⁶⁴ Janice Galloway, *Monster* (opera libretto, score by Sally Beamish) (Glasgow: Scottish Music Information Centre, 2002), p.55.

climactically, the birth and death of Mary's first child, seen as the final trigger for the inspiration of her story.

There is one set throughout the opera which consists of large, angular rocks scattered over the front of the stage to represent both arctic wasteland, dramatic alpine scenery, furniture at Diodati, and Wollstonecraft's gravestone. The whole is unavoidably reminiscent of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, the German Romanticist, and especially his *Sea of Ice*.⁶⁵ During the scenes at the Godwin home, the players bring chairs from off-stage to be used as their furniture, thus domesticating the wild landscape. Over all this broods the 'portrait' of Mary Wollstonecraft, which in fact consists of a portico half-emerging from the rocks, in which sits, for much of the opera, the singer who plays Mary's mother - a living portrait. This setting, especially the portrait, hints at the major themes, and dominant relationships in the opera: Mary Wollstonecraft (or rather her ghost) is on stage throughout, brooding over the scene, exerting her influence from beyond the grave, not only on her daughter, but on the other characters too. William Godwin is also central in Mary's life and in the opera's foregrounding of the influence of her parents, it traverses new biographical ground in its search for the sources of her creativity. Simply through being the offspring of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Godwin is herself famous by association before she has even entered public life and consciousness. This is demonstrated in the opera when we see characters who have never met her who hold her in awe, and when they do meet her, it is always with fascination at her origins and associations, rather than with any interest for Mary herself. When she addresses Monsieur Frankpierre directly for the first time, he responds 'Is this really the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft?'.⁶⁶ Similarly, when Percy Shelley first meets her, he too has fallen prey to this kind of star-gazing, but fortunately also has the intelligence to be aware of it:

SHELLEY The daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft.

MARY This is me, sir, no other.

SHELLEY (*awe-struck*) Wollstonecraft and Godwin, in
one form!

MARY Yet neither, I fear.

⁶⁵ Which, like other Friedrich paintings, has been used as a jacket illustration for *Frankenstein* (in the case of *Sea of Ice*, the 1996 Norton edition).

⁶⁶ Galloway, p. 9.

SHELLEY Forgive me, Miss Godwin. I should greet you
as yourself.⁶⁷

These kinds of reactions from those around her indicate the pressures Mary is subject to in the search for an idea for her story. She is not just taking part in a ghost-story competition but in a test of her worthiness as a daughter.

Moreover, her parentage marks her out as radically different from the more commonplace members of her step-family, and she is therefore a rather isolated figure. In this way there is a subtle identification made between Mary and the monster. The opera is after all, entitled *Monster*, and yet the central figure is not the monster from the novel (who in fact does not even appear in the piece), but Mary Godwin/Shelley herself. Mary is isolated not only in her extraordinary parentage, but also in her extraordinary intelligence, which is mentioned before she has even appeared, by Jane Clairmont: 'My sister would always sleep. She must rest her monstrous intellect.'⁶⁸ And later Jane bursts out 'Mary was never a child!'. Mary's freakishly precocious intelligence marks her out, not only as special, but abnormal, and like the monster, without a childhood. Yet paradoxically, as Polidori asserts in the very next line 'Miss Godwin is ever a child. A daughter of great minds.'⁶⁹ The fact that she is also effectively abandoned by both parents at one time or another, renders Mary Shelley multiply alone, and again the monster's double.

However, it is unfortunately the very qualities that make the libretto a subtle and well-written story, that also make it a wordy and over-elaborate piece of musical theatre. Fiona Maddocks, in her review of the performance at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, centres her argument upon this conflict between words and music. She gives a brief history of this relationship over the centuries, pointing out how the libretto has gradually become more important, until now when, 'never has the union of words and music mattered more. Whereas composers once sought effective craftsmen to provide their librettos, today they turn to the finest writers and poets. Should we be surprised that these want their words to get equal billing?'.⁷⁰ This tension, Maddocks feels, leads directly to the problems of comprehensibility that were so apparent in the performance of *Monster* that she saw: 'The libretto is dense, full of

⁶⁷ Galloway, p. 25.

⁶⁸ Galloway, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Galloway, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Fiona Maddocks, 'Shelley some mistake', *Observer*, 10 March 2002, p. 12.

allusion and quotation. The synopsis alone takes four pages, not in itself a fault but surely an indication of a wordiness not easily translated into opera. In hanging on to every syllable in order to follow, the ear forces the music into an accompanying role, more incidental than equal.⁷¹

The libretto and the music also clash because of the conversational nature of many of the exchanges written by Galloway, and which are at times positively quotidian. As a text, *Monster* looks almost exactly like a play and contains such mundanities as the following:

MISS LAMB (*calling from the table where the game is almost ready*) Mr Shelley, you shall be Jane's partner. Godwin, you are mine!
GODWIN I hoped for Jane. She is a strategist.
MR LAMB Mrs Godwin shall sit with me. And Mary –
MARY Not Mary! I have no taste for games.
SHELLEY And I have not the talent. I shall talk to Miss Godwin if she will have me.
MARY (*light-heartedly*) Jane will not mind. She always wins.⁷²

To hear this sung in a operatic voices, arguably more suited to the expression of high emotion, is a singularly incongruous experience. The most salient difference between the text of this opera and of others written in English (for instance, by Purcell, Britten, or Birtwhistle) is that the latter are written in verse. Galloway has written prose dialogue, and the effect of hearing Jane Clairmont sing 'We shall catch our death in this place'⁷³ or Mary, 'My mother had light brown hair. Like mine.'⁷⁴ is not stirring or moving, but bathetic. One of the characteristics of song, as well as perhaps more heightened vocabulary, is that many of the lines are repeated, both for musicality, and also (especially in the case of opera) for conveying meaning: 'Not out of idleness did Handel write *da capo* arias, in which the opening section was repeated in case you hadn't caught on first time round. [...] Recitative, sung or spoken, was there to tell the story. Arias gave the audience a chance to pause, composers the opportunity to unleash their talent.'⁷⁵ In the case of *Monster* we are given no such opportunity.

⁷¹ Maddocks.

⁷² Galloway, pp. 25-6.

⁷³ Galloway, p. 20.

⁷⁴ Galloway, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Maddocks.

However, the fact that music can, and indeed must, communicate with the audience irrespective of its verbal content must also be taken into account. The moment of real musical and dramatic power that occurs in the opera, takes place just after the climactic birth scene, where in a few gestures of dramatic shorthand, Mary has her first child and it dies, leaving her bereft and alone on stage. She lies spent, and sings a keening yet quiet melody, almost into her chest. The effect of her grieving-song is not one of high drama; indeed its very power lies in the contrast between its restraint and the preceding tempestuousness of the production. In becoming a mother herself, Mary Godwin had the opportunity to break free of the parental bonds, but it comes to nought, and it is this, as well as the death of the child, that she can be seen to be grieving over. This is heightened by the staging: the ghost of Mary Wollstonecraft carries the baby off. At the beginning of the scene she has reminded Mary of her own passage into the world: 'Wake, Mary! Wake! Your time is come and so am I. A midwife. A doctor with a dull black blade. Mortality under his fingernails.' and as Mary goes further into labour her mother sings 'Ten days dying. I held you, child. I whispered.'⁷⁶ It is as if the Wollstonecraft-ghost is urging the same thing to happen to Mary. Of course, as she is a ghost, she cannot be said to be a character, but rather a projection of the other characters' unconscious attitudes to her, and as such in this scene she serves to represent Mary's sense of her dominance. In an interview Beamish discussed her characterisation of Mary Wollstonecraft, and observed:

In the second act, it becomes a much more sinister presence, and in fact culminates in the fact that Mary Shelley perceives that her mother has taken her newborn child. So her mother represents death and poison. I mean the way she died was by blood-poisoning after giving birth to Mary. I felt it was this idea that somehow Mary Shelley felt her life was darkened by the manner in which she was born.⁷⁷

Mary feels trapped by her mother's influence to such an extent that it will even determine her own role as a mother: as Wollstonecraft's birth was unsuccessful, so should hers be. And it is this event in the opera that ironically gives her the final

⁷⁶ Galloway, pp. 45 & 46.

⁷⁷ Sally Beamish, recorded interview (BBC Radio 3, 4 May 2002. Interval of live broadcast of *Monster* from Theatre Royal, Glasgow).

trigger to create the work that will form her intellectual and artistic independence from her parents, and wrenches her own identity free in the eyes of posterity. This has the result that in the fictional scheme of this work, *Frankenstein* becomes a substitute for the dead baby; as in Jong's early poems, childbirth and artistic creativity are opposed and mutually exclusive.

HYPertext

As well as describing the content of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) in as much detail as I can, I will also be discussing the medium in which it appears in similar detail. This is not only because I am assuming less knowledge of the form in the reader, but also because *Patchwork Girl* is a deeply self-referential text, to the extent that the medium in which it is written becomes one of its themes, as well as serving as one of the major metaphors through which other themes of the novel are expressed. Reading a hypertext is not a conventional reading experience: it is a computerised text in which the narrative is not linear, and each time we re-visit a hypertext its 'pages', or more strictly speaking in hypertext terminology, its *lexias*, can re-assemble themselves in almost any order.⁷⁸ Each *lexia* consists of a text-window, with a number of buttons along the bottom. The 'Links' button brings up a list of the other *lexias* the current one is linked to: there might be several links, or only one, and the text of each *lexia* may consist of a few words or several paragraphs. Thus, although we may choose several different paths through a hypertext narrative, and start from almost any point within it, the experience is not entirely anarchic, for the sole reason that the links between the *lexias* have been created (and thus one's path determined to a certain extent) by the author. There are many instances in *Patchwork Girl* when there is only one link to select in moving from one *lexia* to another, and thus the experience can be close to that of reading a conventional novel. Certainly, when all (or most) of the *lexias* that constitute *Patchwork Girl* have been explored it is possible to identify a firm narrative in the text. From the 'map' that is provided as a tool for navigating the text it is clear that there are six main groupings of links, one of which corresponds to the title-page, and the others to the five 'entrances' to the narrative displayed on this title-page. These are 'body of text,'

⁷⁸ The terminology is taken from Roland Barthes' lexicon of textual description. The relation of Barthes' work to hypertext is discussed below.

'graveyard,' 'journal,' 'story,' and 'crazy quilt.' In identifying the main narrative thread, it is the 'story' section of the text that I will address first.

The story, then, is most simply described as a re-imagining of *Frankenstein*, with the same central idea as *The Bride of Frankenstein*: finishing off Victor Frankenstein's abandoned project of creating a female monster. Like *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Patchwork Girl* also brings the fictional figure of Mary Godwin into the narrative mix so that her life and work are explicitly linked. This, however, is as far as the similarities between the hypertext and the film can be carried. Where the film remains in more or less the same fictional universe as the novel, retaining Victor, Elizabeth, the monster and various other characters and simply rearranging them in a different narrative, Jackson's text escapes *Frankenstein* altogether and creates its own fictional universe in which the original story, Mary Shelley's own writings, her life (both real, and imagined by Jackson) and hypertext itself, as well as a host of other intertexts blend to create a meditation on (amongst other themes) identity, the body, and writing. The creator of the female monster is Mary Godwin/Shelley herself and the creation seems to occur simultaneously with the creation of *Frankenstein*: i.e. in 1816 near Geneva. Like the monster in the novel, the she-monster is sewn together from a patchwork of different body-parts. She escapes after her 'birth', and as in the novel, creator and creation meet again by accident. Their relationship is, however, entirely opposite to that between Victor and his monster: Mary greets her creature with curiosity, and it transpires that the she-monster had fled from her, rather than vice versa. The two reinstate their mistress/pupil, parent/child relationship, and bizarrely they also become lovers. Unlike Victor, Mary also recognises the reversibility of their relationship:

I wish I had her long strong limbs; I would run up these Alps, as she tells me she does, following the changing light across fields of ice. How quickly now our positions reverse and teacher turns pupil! She has seen things I will never see; she remembers more than I will experience in my whole life. And yet she is hungry for more. I know she will leave me soon.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl* (Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1995), 'female trouble'. Each lexia corresponds to a page of conventional text, but is named rather than numbered. Hence references to *Patchwork Girl* consist of page-names, not numbers.

And leave she does, for America, at which point the narrating voice becomes that of the she-monster. Before she leaves, as a token of their connection, the two women exchange a slip of skin in a small surgical operation they perform themselves, and the she-monster (who remains nameless throughout the narrative) reflects: 'I do not know what came of the off-shoot of me, if it dried and fell off or lived in its ring of scars. But I am a strong vine. The graft took, the bit of skin is still a living pink, and so I remember when I was Mary, and how I loved a monster, and became one. I bring you my story which is ours.'⁸⁰

This is the narration of her travels, to America and across it. On the voyage out, dressed in mourning and a full veil throughout the journey, she is the cause of much speculation amongst the other passengers and crew. Each has their own theory as to who she 'really' is, her provenance and life-story as mysterious as her gender. Women believe she is a man in disguise, the men believe she is a particularly Amazonian woman, 'but' she concludes 'one way or another nearly everyone on board worked out their particular theory to the conclusion that I wanted them sexually, and with my great strength would have them if they did not take the utmost precautions. Such is the fascination of disguise.'⁸¹ She befriends a cabin-boy, Chancy, who takes her under his wing once they land in New York. They are taken in by a spiritualist friend of his, Madame Q, who provides bed and board in exchange for the she-monster's presence at her séances. Once, while they are living there, Chancy happens upon the she-monster naked, and thus discovers her true, patchworked identity. In response Chancy reveals himself to have been a woman in disguise all along. The two physically anomalous women fall into a delighted affair with each other, but it does not last. When they part, the she-monster begins her wanderings:

I wandered for a very long time. Things changed. I did not pay much attention. At times I remembered who I was, at times I did not. For long periods a single purpose would fill me with a conviction that seemed each time new, and I would plant myself, secure a job, make acquaintances. But each time my situation would eventually unravel [...] Hopscotching thus, I travelled west. At last I arrived at the ocean, and as I could go no further, I decided to make my final stand.⁸²

⁸⁰ Jackson, 'us'.

⁸¹ Jackson, 'guises'.

⁸² Jackson, 'interim'.

Here, she attempts to fashion a coherent identity from her cobbled together elements: 'I cultivated preferences to found a personality on: I preferred Ovaltine to chocolate milk; I liked retsina and disapproved of dessert wines [...] the most disparate sentiments will seem unified under the aegis of I'.⁸³ From this extract and from more explicit references later ('airplanes', 'staplers', 'cappuccinos') the reader realises that the she-monster has undergone something of an Orlando-like journey through time as well as space. She finally decides that it will be easiest to achieve her goal if she simply adopts a ready-made identity wholesale. She approaches a woman named Elsie Hull who agrees to 'sell' the she-monster her life. This drive to form a unified personality comes in the face of the fact that she is falling apart – her body is beginning to disintegrate:

My hand dropped off in a supermarket, where it sounded like a heavy fruit falling, so the produce person gave me a stern look from across the avocados until I picked it up and plopped it in my basket, between the mushrooms and the cabbage. When my ear went in WalMart I folded it in a hanky and put it in my purse, and pulled my hair forward to hide the raw spot.⁸⁴

The final disintegration takes place in two alternative versions, one of which occurs in the garden and is described in a surprisingly lyrical way:

My foot strove skyward, slowed and plummeted in a controlled, definitive arc, trailing blood in mannered specks. My guts split open and something frilly spilled out, pretty pink coils unwinding like streamers. [...] my torso fell like a cat, turning; my arms made broad vague gestures that embraced the landscape; my blood beautifully sprigged the sky, a clear red against the blue.⁸⁵

But the she-monster is resurrected, and finds herself no longer striving after wholeness, but someone who has come to terms with her variegated, factitious nature. She becomes reconciled to her nomadic nature, travelling Death Valley and haunting

⁸³ Jackson 'passing' & "'I'".

⁸⁴ Jackson, 'more partings'.

⁸⁵ Jackson, 'diaspora'.

the tourists there. The arid environment is as sterile as the arctic wastes that Victor and his creature end up wandering, but opposite in every other way. She also begins to write her own story, an activity she finds only partially satisfactory:

Sometimes it bothers me to put my words on paper. Set in ranks, they argue I possess a "life" (as in Lives of the Artists) [...] It bothers me, the thought of my words becoming clues, something someone might peer at to try to find a lost object. I don't want to be a reclusive beetle disappearing into a sheaf of papers. I was not one person and there is more than one way to write this. I wish there were a way to show that every latest word I write has space for anything after it.⁸⁶

It is at around this point that the narrative itself begins to disintegrate into a rambling series of meditations on writing, intertextuality, hypertext, and identity, that constitute the 'body of text' group of lexias.

It is here that the parallels between reader, writer, and creator are explicitly highlighted. Theoretical issues are explored by Jackson, and the nature of hypertext itself is also explored in more detail, as passages from non-fictional sources, such as Derrida's *Disseminations* and Barbara Maria Stafford's *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* amongst others, are linked to the fictional narrations of the she-monster. We also begin to realise that the text being produced by the she-monster is the very text we are reading:

Assembling these patched words in an electronic space, I feel half-blind, as if the entire text is within reach, but because of some myopic condition I am only familiar with from my dreams, I can see only that part most immediately before me, and have no sense of how that part relates to the rest.⁸⁷

Here the narrator's description of the sensation of writing in hypertext resonates with the reader because it is so close to that of reading a hypertext: we too feel 'half-blind', as we feel our way through the unfamiliar medium. We are used to being able to see the whole of the text before us in book-form, always with the same sequence of pages. To a certain extent the experience of hypertext is just such an experience precisely

⁸⁶ Jackson, 'a life'.

⁸⁷ Jackson, 'this writing'.

because the reader defines it in contrast to the experience of reading page-print. The passage quoted above also highlights the fact that the reader and the writer share the same medium, and therefore the reader takes on many characteristics of the writer, including creator of the text. In this way they can almost be said to become a literal expression of Barthes' empowered, 'writerly' reader. This connection between the work of recent cultural theorists and hypertext has not escaped the notice of those writing in the area of hypertext theory. George P. Landow points to the almost spooky parallels between what Barthes describes as being an 'ideal textuality' and hypertext:

In this ideal text the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.⁸⁸

What may have been difficult to conceive for Barthes' first readers in 1973, springs nimbly to comprehension when the experience of reading hypertext becomes available. In this way, hypertext provides what Landow calls a 'laboratory' for the understanding of critical texts: 'Hypertext promises to embody and thereby test aspects of theory, particularly those concerning textuality, narrative, and the roles or functions of reader and writer.'⁸⁹ In *Patchwork Girl* hypertext not only embodies the theory, but explicitly addresses it, rendering it one of its own intertexts. Jackson includes a passage from Derrida's *Disseminations* in a lexia entitled 'Interrupting D', in which she does indeed interrupt the philosopher with her own observations. Thus she engages in a dialogue with the original text, creating the 'writerly' reading environment once envisioned by Barthes.

This 'writerly' reading environment is created not only in the conscious relation of the writer to her intertexts, but also in the construction of the reader as creator/writer of the text. There is a series of complex metaphors at work throughout *Patchwork Girl* which take as their starting point the patchworked nature of the body of both Frankenstein's monster, and Jackson's she-monster. These bodies serve as

⁸⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller ([1973] Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 5.

⁸⁹ George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 2.

metaphors for the intertextual patchwork of all texts (the title *Patchwork Girl* is itself an allusion to L. Frank Baum's 1913 novel, *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*), and also for the nature of hypertext, which at times seems a random collection of passages of text, held together only by the thread of the reader's path through it. It is in this sense, then, that the reader of *Patchwork Girl* is also to a certain extent its creator, and addressed as such at points in the novel. If the reader begins from the top of the list of contents on the title-page (the nominal starting-point of any text), the section entitled 'a graveyard', they will find themselves reading what could be described as the first page of the novel, consisting of the following sentences: 'I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see me whole, you will have to sew me together yourself.'⁹⁰ There follows a series of lexias that correspond to a different part of the she-monster's body, each containing a small description of the person from which that body-part came. So the reader works their way through the body of the monster, learning that her eyeballs came from Tituba 'who loved to read. Born crippled, what else could she do?', her lips from Margaret who 'laughed so freely, shoulders shaking, stomach heaving, saliva bright on her lips, that the townspeople frowned on her,' and on through trunk, arms and legs. The final link, 'out', informs us that 'Burdened with body parts, your fingernails packed with mud and chips of bone, you slink out of the graveyard. A kind of resurrection has taken place.'⁹¹ The reader has become both Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley.

The notion of identity is thus destabilized by Jackson's text, and this becomes another way in which *Patchwork Girl* engages with poststructuralist poetics. When the she-monster tells us 'Assembling these patched words in an electronic space, I feel half-blind', she is drawing attention not only to the community between reader and writer, but also to kinship between the 'patched words in space' and her own body. If the text is a body that can be constructed and re-constructed by the Frankensteinian reader, then in Jackson's hypertextual scheme the reverse is also true: the identity of the subject (represented by the body) consists in text. The she-monster is constructing her identity for the reader through text, and therefore becomes embodied through the text. Following on from this, if identity is constituted by the text, then identity is therefore as fluid and 'intertextual' as Jackson's text itself. Hypertext therefore becomes a metaphor for a particular, contemporary conception of identity that arises

⁹⁰ Jackson, 'graveyard'.

⁹¹ Jackson, 'out'.

out of the poststructuralist repudiation of the idea of fixed, concrete subjects as illusory. Thus *Frankenstein* and by association, Mary Shelley, become emblems of, not to say mascots for, this particular play of ideas: its central trope is of a fragmented, assembled body, and one, moreover, created by a woman. In both the new conception of identity as fluid, and in Jackson's fictional world (which is an expression of this concept) women have the advantage over men: 'My brother monster was a botched resurrection under a god for whom the unity of the body had lost its cohesive force, its moral necessity.[...] Not a resurrection, but a made thing, I too am jumbled and jinxed, but I have the stomach for it, though my beginnings are equally muddy.'⁹² The she-monster goes through a phase where she attempts to form a cohesive identity, and which she characterises as a 'conservative coup': 'A fanatical upstart with backward social views, my duodenum had enlisted its weaker neighbors and trounced the casual coalition that had governed my childhood and teens [...] My most conservative part wanted, like Pinocchio, to be *real*.'⁹³ Yet ultimately she accepts and positively revels in her variegated nature. And in the fictional world of *Patchwork Girl* it is precisely because she is a woman that she can do this. In this way she becomes the reverse of another invention of literary history – Shakespeare's sister. Where Woolf's character dies penniless and alone, forgotten by the canon-makers, Jackson's creation is a celebration of marginality.

It may also have become clear by now that Jackson's use of the trope of 'patchwork' is important to this theoretical melange. She introduces a new set of terms to describe (amongst other things) the phenomenon of hypertext: terms like 'patchwork' 'stitched' 'crazy quilt' 'sewn' and so-on, are added to the already existing terms, *web*, *node*, *network*, thus giving a more explicitly feminine inflection to the business of the creation of hypertext. In using the quilting/sewing metaphor for female artistic creativity, Jackson foregrounds the feminine activity that Victor Frankenstein would have had to engage in in order to create his monster. At the beginning of the narrative in which Mary Godwin/Shelley reflects on what she has just done, she tells us 'I had made her, writing deep into the night by candlelight, until the tiny black letters blurred into stitches and I began to feel that I was sewing a great quilt, as the old women in town do night after night [...] I have looked with reciprocal coolness their way not wondering what stories joined the fragments in their

⁹² Jackson, 'botched bro'.

⁹³ Jackson, 'revised'.

workbaskets.⁹⁴ Just as the metaphor seems to reverse so that writing is not only a metaphor for sewing, but vice versa, we move into the next lexia, entitled 'sewn' and find the reversal complete: 'I had sewn her, stitching deep into the night by candlelight, until the tiny black stitches wavered into script and I began to feel that I was writing, that this creature I was assembling was a brash attempt to achieve by artificial means the unity of a life-form'.⁹⁵

In linking the activities of sewing and writing, as well as eliding the activities of Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley, Jackson is also participating in an American feminist tradition that has made the connection between the two activities since the 'first wave' feminists of the nineteenth century. This connection came into being via the apparently unlikely medium of quilting bees which eventually came to be seen as a site of female emancipation and power. In the lexia 'quilting', Jackson directs our attention to the fact that 'It was at a church quilting bee in Cleveland that Susan B. Anthony gave her first speech on women's suffrage.'⁹⁶ Through a 'footnote' lexia, she then leads us to the source of this information: an essay by Elaine Showalter, entitled 'Piecing and Writing' based on a paper given at the 1985 Colloquium at Columbia University on the 'Poetics of Gender'. Showalter traces the connections between writing and quilting in nineteenth-century American women's writing. The quilting bee was an important social gathering for many American women, especially in rural communities, as this was a place 'where women came together to exchange information, learn new skills, and discuss political issues'.⁹⁷ Quilting was therefore associated with a powerful social dynamic that was central to many women's lives, and therefore it should not be surprising if quilting as a metaphor tended to shape the way they thought about many other aspects of their lives. And when women began to write professionally, they did so in the same spirit that they quilted, treating it as a craft, not an art. As quiltmakers used already extant patterns to build their designs, early American women fiction writers used the conventions of genre as their building blocks or patches. In this way, Showalter argues, 'As in piecing [the sewing together of individual patches to make a pattern], in the hands of an imaginative writer, women's novels based upon conventional designs could achieve true artistic stature

⁹⁴ Jackson, 'written'.

⁹⁵ Jackson, 'sewn'.

⁹⁶ Jackson, 'quilting'.

⁹⁷ Elaine Showalter, 'Piecing and Writing', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 222-247 (p. 224).

and power.’⁹⁸ In the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe and other writers, however, this could be a source of weakness: ‘[her] reputation has generally suffered from assumptions about her failure to live up to dominant standards of literary form. As one nineteenth-century critic complained, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* seemed to lack unity and formal design.’⁹⁹ Showalter then goes on to reclaim Stowe’s most famous novel from the grip of more conventional critics, and argues for its quilt-like nature. Thus, with the weight of literary history behind it, the metaphor gains some rhetorical power. And of course in the light of the fact that ‘text’ derives from the Latin for ‘tissue’ or something woven, then it fills out further.

Jackson has made her own electronic patchwork, not with pieces of fabric, or even the building blocks of genre, but from the screens of hypertext. Indeed, there is even a group of links entitled ‘crazy quilt’ in which the text in each lexia is made up of spliced-together sentences and passages taken from Jackson’s main intertexts: *Frankenstein* (obviously), L. Frank Baum’s *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, Barbara Maria Stafford’s *Body Criticism*, and the manual for the software programme she is working with, *Getting Started with Storyspace*. This results in a kind of textual piebald effect:

Lacking sense and loving fun, it is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. Biological parcels moved across and up and down as if they were endless lists without copulas. We will passical the classical. You organize writing spaces by grouping them together on the screen, and by placing writing spaces inside other spaces, and one thing so presupposes another that whichever way you turn your patchwork, the figures still seem ill-arranged. Who put noodles in the soup? A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me; I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses.¹⁰⁰

Frankenstein becomes one patch amongst many in Jackson’s textual quilt, and it could be said to function much as does the piece of skin swapped by Mary Godwin and her she-monster before the latter’s departure for America. Just as the she-monster

⁹⁸ Showalter, p. 229.

⁹⁹ Showalter, p. 234.

¹⁰⁰ Jackson, ‘composition’.

describes the patch of skin as 'the off-shoot of me'¹⁰¹ *Patchwork Girl* has become the shoot of a vine sent out into the future, and Jackson has constructed herself as Mary Shelley's literary offspring. This fits neatly with the construction of Mary Shelley in the 'journal' section as a woman restricted by her own time, both physically and mentally. Mary Shelley's monster (as can be seen from the passage quoted on p.202), is also her surrogate – able to escape the conventions that prevent her from running up the Alps:

She is moody, and quieter than I, but has spurts of energy in which it seems she will bring down trees, shake fence-posts out of their holes, startles badgers from their dens with her stamping, her hallooing, her jumping and laughing. Her enthusiasm for life shames me. With what timorousness do I lift my skirts above my knees and inch my way across the log she rolled over the stream, a teacup torrent that would stain my stockings if allowed to do its worst.¹⁰²

Like Orlando, the she-monster travels to a time where she can shed the restrictions of corsets and the contained movements and gestures of a nineteenth-century lady. In this way Jackson remakes Mary Shelley as the progenitor of a deeply contemporary conceptualisation of identity as fluid and multifarious and positions her and her text at the centre of contemporary debates on gender and identity.

RADIO

So far in this chapter, and indeed in many of the other fictions discussed up to now, Mary Shelley has appeared primarily in her capacity as a feminist heroine of one sort or another, whether as a woman writer struggling for a sense of her own identity, or as a pioneer of the idea of woman as a fluid identity. She has not often appeared as a comic figure, her persona perhaps too sombre or earnest to fit comfortably in a comedic context (although she does get some sharp lines in Brenton's *Bloody Poetry*). It is this very earnestness, however, that is the fuel for part of the comedy of the radio programme, *Dead Man Talking* (2001), which is based on the premise of two historical figures being interviewed together. She is paired with Robert Oppenheimer, and is thus constructed primarily as the author of the first science-fiction novel, Victor

¹⁰¹ Jackson, 'us'.

¹⁰² Jackson, 'appetite'.

Frankenstein embodying a warning against going too far - precisely what Oppenheimer was often accused of doing in his involvement with the creation of the atomic bomb. The pairing of these particular historical figures becomes all the more suggestive when we take into account the fact that, as Susan Friedman notes, 'The pervasive use of the birth metaphor at Los Alamos to describe the creation of the first atomic bomb (known as "Oppenheimer's baby," christened informally as "Little Boy," and dropped from a plane named Enola Gay, after the pilot's mother) serves to obscure the bomb's destructiveness and implicate women in its birth.'¹⁰³ And in this programme, Mary Shelley does indeed become implicated in the birth of the bomb.

The programme roughly follows the format of a chat-show, with the host, John Bird, introducing the historical figures with their potted biography, which is interspersed by banter with the two guests, and questions sent in from imaginary listeners. It mixes straight biographical fact with invented nonsense (Mary Shelley doing Pilates and running a donkey sanctuary in her spare time; Oppenheimer secretly writing poetry and hiding scientific formulae in recipes), along with small details of their biography magnified to the point of ridiculousness (Mary Shelley's supposed pride in her hair; Oppenheimer's smoking). Both are presented as pompous and vain, but in the case of Mary Shelley, and despite the absurdity of much of the comedy, the writers, Andrew McGibbon and Robert Chandler, manage to avoid the over-familiar routes through her biography that have so far been evident in most of the fictions, and approach it instead from a more oblique angle. This is partly because of the need to create an effective comic character from a historical figure who does not have a particularly well-known persona, other than being the creator of *Frankenstein*. Thus, much is made of her maudlin humourlessness, which is partly a result of the deaths of almost everyone close to her, but also of her role – highlighted by her juxtaposition with Oppenheimer – as a Cassandra-figure. In her first words she mournfully addresses her fellow-guest: 'It is not a pleasure to share the same air as this destroyer of futurity. Grief is my sister; everlasting lamentation is my fate.'¹⁰⁴ Her role as the mother of science fiction, celebrated by Brian Aldiss, has been disregarded in the more recent fictions in favour of her role as troubled artist or feminist heroine, but in this programme (probably a result of its more popular appeal), Shelley the science-writer returns, and *Frankenstein* becomes once again a warning about mad scientists

¹⁰³ Friedman, p. 84.

¹⁰⁴ Appendix II, p. 230.

going too far. However, in her pairing with Robert Oppenheimer, McGibbon and Chandler lend an interesting, darker twist to the current image of Victor Frankenstein as father of genetically modified tomatoes.

Also embodied in this pairing is the art/science divide, barely existent at Shelley's time, but which has since become dominant in many readings of *Frankenstein*. Victor's concentration on science, or more strictly speaking natural philosophy, to the exclusion of more humanistic pursuits is often seen as the root of all the trouble in the novel. This reading is embodied here in the figure of Oppenheimer, perceived as elevating science above all else, and from which trait a certain amount of comic mileage is gained:

RO: Los Alamos filled me with nothing but a sense of awe
and wonder. It was the most beautiful place in the world.
It put me closer to God.
JB: So why d'you blow it up then?
RO: It wasn't close enough.¹⁰⁵

This flippancy, conceivably meant to be here the result of Oppenheimer's scientific detachment, is contrasted with Mary Shelley's humourless emotionalism, which is tied partly to her epoch and manner of expression, but also to her role as an artist:

MS: Oh, do not endow your creations with names and
souls. Do you not think, Mr Oppenheimer, that we are
ourselves the depositories of the evidence of the subjects
that we consider?
RO: Well, you don't know. Now, look here Mary...
MS: You see he's a dullard, a dolt. He's an unpoetical
halfwit.¹⁰⁶

However, McGibbon and Chandler also deliberately invert this divide, first by depicting Oppenheimer as a closet poet, and also by exaggerating the rationalism of Shelley's background so that William Godwin becomes himself a scientist: 'My father once told me that a scientist will set his own house ablaze in order to study the passage of fire through a furnished room. Do you have any idea how many times we had to move?'.¹⁰⁷ Mary Shelley's role as sensitive and humanistic artist is also

¹⁰⁵ Appendix II, p. 236.

¹⁰⁶ Appendix II, p. 238.

¹⁰⁷ Appendix II, p. 233.

undercut by a twist that unites the warring guests: it transpires that the book Oppenheimer was read as a child and which inspired him to become a scientist was *The Last Man*. He exclaims, 'You have no idea what a profound impact that book had on me! [...] The desolate landscape, the sole survivor – I feel sure it touched me on some deep level, I believe it's what made me want to become a scientist to try to prevent that future from ever occurring!',¹⁰⁸ and John Bird drily responds 'Yes, I'm not sure that building an atom bomb was quite the way to do it.' Apart from making dramatic use of the rest of Shelley's oeuvre and highlighting her continuing interest in futurology, this plot device ironically renders her indirectly responsible for the creation of the atomic bomb. Thus, in the same way that Lochhead literalises the 'conception' of *Frankenstein* in her poem 'Dreaming Frankenstein', and Mary Shelley is literalised as the mother of the monster in *Patchwork Girl*, Shelley is literalised in *Dead Man Talking* as the creator of mad scientists.

The kind of portrait offered of Mary Shelley in a half-hour comedy programme will largely be determined by the exigencies of character comedy, in which the humour gains much of its impetus and power from reliance on the knowledge of the audience. Thus, there is a certain amount of play made of the fact that although the audience almost certainly knows that Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, they are probably less likely to be aware of her other work, hence Oppenheimer's reference to 'the remainder of your canon which the reading public has the somewhat stubborn habit of forgetting'.¹⁰⁹ As a result of this, Mary Shelley's vanity can be seen to arise from the insecurity of the artist famous for one work to the exclusion of their other writings, and also overshadowed by a more talented spouse. Thus Mary Shelley, when asked by one 'listener' whether she ever wrote poetry responds, 'Yes, I did. But mainly Percy did that because he was hopeless at plot, so I wrote the novels, and I also wrote the literary criticism. And the *Rambles*. And the *Biographical Essays*.'¹¹⁰ Before this, she has already responded to John Bird's statement that she wrote 'the greatest Gothic horror novel of our age' with frank agreement: 'Yes, that's right. It is the greatest.'¹¹¹ However, she is also at pains to correct the misunderstanding that is Gothic horror: 'It is an elaboration. It is a tapestry of themes and dispositions, on such subjects as the existence of

¹⁰⁸ Appendix II, p. 241.

¹⁰⁹ Appendix II, p. 237.

¹¹⁰ Appendix II, p. 238.

¹¹¹ Appendix II, p. 232.

doppelgängers, and evolution. It is a Möbius strip of pursuer and pursued, of Cain and Abel.¹¹² All of this adds up to a Mary Shelley anxious to correct misconceptions not only about her work, but also about her place in the canon. Her rampant insecurity is such that later on, she loses her head slightly and ends up ranting ‘You see, I think I’m the best. *I am the best of we three*’.¹¹³

Not all of the humour, however, relies on audience knowledge (or lack of it) for its effectiveness. The running joke about Shelley’s vanity over her hair reaches such heights of absurdity it is immaterial whether or not the audience is familiar with Miranda Seymour’s biography.¹¹⁴ When asked by a ‘listener’ ‘What would you best like to be remembered for?’, Mary decides ‘I don’t know, maybe, my hair’,¹¹⁵ and when asked, ‘Who do you most admire in the twentieth century?’ she replies demurely ‘Um, Toni & Guy’.¹¹⁶ The end of the programme relies on a mixture of these elements - audience knowledge, invention, and exaggerated fact - for its effects. The host, John Bird, has hinted at points during the programme that the two guests are to receive ‘a surprise’ at the end of the show, consisting of the ‘last thing they’d ever expect to see’. They are confronted with their creations: Oppenheimer with a replica of his bomb, Shelley with her creature. However, the bomb turns out not to be a replica at all, but armed and dangerous, and which Oppenheimer initially refuses to defuse because ‘This is truly exciting. I was never able to see it up close before. It’s very sexual.’¹¹⁷ He ignores Bird’s increasingly panicked calls for intervention and instead starts crooning ‘Hello boy! Daddy’s home. Poppy’s home. Come to daddy.’ The creature, however, begins tinkering with the bomb, and after initial fears, ends up defusing it because, as Shelley points out he ‘watched it on the Open University didn’t you? Clever baby!’¹¹⁸ Thus both scientist and novelist are constructed as the ‘parents’ of their respective creations. However, in this scenario, Friedman’s argument that the childbirth metaphor in the context of the bomb ‘serves to obscure the bomb’s destructiveness and implicate women in its birth’ is given a literal twist in

¹¹² Appendix II, p. 232.

¹¹³ Appendix II, p. 239.

¹¹⁴ In which we learn of Claire Clairmont’s ‘awe [...] of Mary’s cleverness, of her pale skin, intense hazel eyes and – her crowning glory – a nimbus of red-gold hair, fine as a filigree web’ and later that she was ‘admired for her beautiful complexion and finespun cloud of hair.’ – Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (London: John Murray, 2000), pp. 49 & 83.

¹¹⁵ Appendix II, p. 239.

¹¹⁶ Appendix II, p. 238.

¹¹⁷ Appendix II, p. 242.

¹¹⁸ Appendix II, p. 243.

that the writers of the programme implicate Mary Shelley herself in the birth of the bomb. Thus the monster's last minute defusion of the ticking menace is seen, in the context of this episode of *Dead Man Talking*, as a redemption of the sins of her scientific creation. This also affirms the 'I-didn't-mean-it' narrative that runs through Mary Shelley's own discussion of her work (at least in this programme), as well as through Victor Frankenstein's and Robert Oppenheimer's, who both claimed that noble intentions were behind the creation of their respective brainchildren. Mary Shelley proves herself worthy of her own irritated insistence earlier in the programme that 'I did not create a monster. I created a very moral being, a warning against parenting, also a warning, Mr Oppenheimer, against men of science who do not know when to stop...'.¹¹⁹

Dead Man Talking is markedly different from the other texts in this chapter, in that it plays with and challenges the reverence in which Mary Shelley tends to be held in both creative and critical contexts. However, it shares with all of the texts in this chapter, and many that have been discussed up to now, an interest in Mary Shelley's role as a parent, and in childbirth, parturition, and parenthood as metaphors for artistic creativity. These metaphors are perhaps inevitable when discussing the life and work of the author of *Frankenstein*: Friedman takes for granted the idea that Mary Shelley consciously intended her novel to express this metaphor: 'She relies on an elaborate narrative of the birth metaphor to express her essential fear that the patriarchal separation of creativities is necessary.'¹²⁰ However, the texts here, in their varying treatments of her life, in the diversity of their media and approaches, highlight the complexity of the metaphor. The matching of conscious intellectual activity with passive biological activity, especially in the case of female artists, will always be problematic because of the implicit denial of agency and will to those artists. Friedman concludes her article on a note of ringing positivity:

Women's oppression begins with the control of the body, the fruits of labor. Consequently, many women writers have gone directly to the source of powerlessness to reclaim that control through the labor of the mind pregnant with the word.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Appendix II, p. 233.

¹²⁰ Friedman, p. 87.

¹²¹ Friedman, p. 94.

Thoughtful employment of the metaphor can admittedly be said to unite two realms which have always been separate in Western philosophical traditions – mind and body. It is a separation that has been successfully used (in its deployment in the childbirth metaphor) to exclude women from the sphere of artistic creativity. However, if this false dichotomy is to be exposed as such, then it cannot be done through the use of an exclusively female body (which is what a birthing body is) as the site of reunion. The idea of a ‘mind pregnant with the word’ simply entrenches an idea of art as passive, as something bestowed upon the artist. This conceptualisation of the relation between mind and body is complicated by Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* which envisages the female body as a less defined and delimited organ, capable of producing many, differently gendered identities, and thus a more realistic site for a future liberation, from the idea of gender itself.

Conclusion

The fictional persona of Mary Shelley has been constructed according to the genre in which she appears, the medium in which that genre is transmitted, and the historical context in which they appear. Her construction can be divided into two broad categories: her role as Percy's wife, and her role as author of *Frankenstein*. These have correspondingly led to her construction as romantic heroine, or uncanny Gothic devil-woman. In later years as her critical reputation has grown, her role as author of *Frankenstein* has also led to her construction as feminist heroine. As the twentieth century progressed, increasing awareness of the dangers as well as the benefits of scientific research and achievement led to the growth of a new genre - science-fiction - and Mary Shelley's ordination as its high-priestess. In this capacity her role as author of *Frankenstein* has led to a corresponding perception of her as a Pandora-figure, releaser of technological evil. Throughout the history of the development of her persona we have seen the overlapping of discourses, as fiction and biography feed on each other, their generic boundaries blur, and they borrow each other's techniques. Later, we have seen this continue, but also to go on to include critical texts, as her academic reputation has grown.

The elision of life and work both in the fictions in which she appears as feminist heroine, and in those in which she appears as science-fiction writer means that she is constructed as either Victor or the monster, but in the significant majority of cases as an unnatural figure: as a coldly intellectual woman, socially engineered by her parents; as a mother whose overweening grief drives her to want to revive her dead baby, either in actuality, or in the form of a book; or as a producer of monsters, responsible for the evil launched by Victor Frankenstein into the world. In all cases too, her life is explained by her work, or her work is explained by reference to her life.

However, in the history of her fictional relationship with *Frankenstein*, there is a pronounced progression from her construction as a stereotypical Romantic artist, subject to her work, barely controlling the torrent of creation that spills forth despite her (a construction which childbirth as a metaphor for artistic creativity only reinforces), to a figure more in control, more consciously creative, with greater agency in both her creative activities and her life. Her lack of agency in earlier fictions is a result of the twin causes of her heritage as a Romantic, and the

remarkably young age at which she wrote *Frankenstein* (which, along with her gender in earlier years of criticism, gave rise to the view that she could not possibly have been aware of the many political and philosophical implications of her work, let alone have consciously produced them). Her gradual acquisition of conscious creative power in works by Liz Lochhead, Shelley Jackson, and even in Miranda Seymour's recent biography, is a result of a growing awareness of, and wish to correct, the tendency in Mary Shelley criticism to fall upon biography as a critical tool. This tendency resulted in her presentation as a figure swept along by the circumstances of her life, which in turn affected the terms in which her work was discussed. Whether intentionally or not, some later authors attempt to present Mary Shelley as a figure much more in control of both her circumstances and the work she produced. This presentation also chimes with more recent views of her biographical narrative, which emphasise her active working life as a writer in the years after the deaths of the other Romantics, and also her control of their images and her own. Thus, although it is tempting to see Mary Shelley in her fictional incarnation as being misrepresented, whether as romantic heroine wilting in Percy's strong arms, or as Romantic artist subjected to the inexorable demands of her gift, this overview tends to cast her once again in the role of victim. Instead of seeing her as a kind of victim of fictional representations of her life, and casting her role in their history in much the same terms of helplessness as one found in so much of her biography, it is possible to see her fictional representations as rather continuing a tradition which she, amongst others, helped to inaugurate.

Appendix I
Poems by Erica Jong and Liz Lochhead

ERICA JONG

Dear Marys, Dear Mother, Dear Daughter

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin
Author of
A Vindication
Of the Rights of Woman:
Born 27 April, 1759
Died 10 September 1797
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S
GRAVESTONE, PLACED BY
WILLIAM GODWIN, 1798

I was lonesome as Crusoe.
- MARY SHELLEY

It is all over
little one, the flipping
and overleaping, the watery
somersaulting alone in the oneness
under the hill, under
the old, lonely bellybutton...
- GALWAY KINNELL

What terrified me will terrify others...
- MARY SHELLEY

1/ NEEDLEPOINT

Mothers & daughters...
something sharp
catches in my throat
as I watch my mother
nervous before flight,
do needlepoint –
blue irises & yellow daffodils
against a stippled woolen sky.

5

She pushes the needle
in & out
as she once pushed me:
sharp needle to the canvas of her life –
embroidering her faults
in prose & poetry,

10

writing the fiction of my bitterness, the poems of my need.	15
“You hate me,” she accuses, needle poised, “why not admit it?”	20
I shake my head. The air is thick with love gone bad, the odor of old blood.	
If I were small enough I would suck your breast... but I say nothing, big mouth, filled with poems.	25
Whatever love is made of – wool, blood, Sunday lamb, books of verse with violets crushed between the pages, tea with herbs, lemon juice for hair, portraits sketched of me asleep at nine months old – this twisted skein of multicolored wool, this dappled canvas or this page of print joins us like the twisted purple cord through which we first pulsed poems.	30 35 40 45
Mother, what I feel for you is more & less than love.	

2/ MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT GODWIN & MARY GODWIN SHELLEY

She was “lonesome as a Crusoe,” orphaned by childbirth, orphaned being born, killing her mother with a stubborn afterbirth – the medium they’d shared....	5
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Puppies were brought
to draw off Mary's milk,
& baby Mary screamed. 10

She grew up
to marry Shelley,
have four babes
(of whom three died) –
& one immortal monster. 15

Byron & Shelley
strutted near the lake
& wrote their poems
on purest alpine air.
The women had their pregnancies
& fears. 20

They bore the babies,
copied manuscripts,
& listened to the talk
that love was "free." 25

The brotherhood of man
did not apply:
all they contributed
to life
was life. 30

& Doctor Frankenstein
was punished
for his pride:
the hubris of a man
creating life. 35
He reared a wretched
animated corpse –
& Shelley praised the book
but missed the point.

Who were these gothic monsters? 40
Merely men.

Self-exiled Byron
with his Mistress Fame,
& Percy Shelley
with his brains aboil, 45
the seaman
who had never learned to swim.

Dear Marys,
it was clear

that you were truer. 50
Daughter of daughters,
mothers of future mothers,
you sought to soar
beyond complaints
of woman's lot – 55
& died in childbirth
for the Rights of Man.

3/ EXILES

This was the sharpness
of my mother's lesson.
Being a woman
meant eternal strife.
No colored wool could stitch 5
the trouble up;
no needlepoint
could cover it with flowers.

When Byron plated
the exiled wanderer, 10
he left his ladies
pregnant or in ruin.
He left his children
fatherless for fame,
then wrote great letters 15
theorizing pain.

He scarcely knew
his daughters any more
that Mary knew the Mary
who expired 20
giving her birth.

All that remained in him:
a hollow loneliness
about the heart,
the milkless tug of memory, 25
the singleness of creatures,
who breathe air.

Birth is the start
of loneliness
& loneliness is the start 30
of poetry:
that seems a crude
reduction of it all,
but truth is often crude.

& so I dream 35
of daughters
as a man might dream
of giving birth,
& as my mother dreamed
of daughters 40
& had three –
none of them her dream.

& I reach out for love
to other women
while my real mother 45
pines for me
& I pine for her,
knowing I would have to be
smaller than a needle
pierced with wool 50
to pierce the canvas of her life
again.

4/ DEAR DAUGHTER

Will you change all this
by my having you,
& by your having everything –
Don Juan's exuberance,
Childe Harold's pilgrimage, 5
books & babies,
recipes & riots.

Probably not.

In making daughters
there is so much needlepoint, 10
so much doing & undoing,
so much yearning –
that the finished pattern cannot please.

My poems will have daughters
everywhere, 15
but my own daughter
will have to grow
into her energy.

I will not call her Mary
or Erica. 20
She will shape
a wholly separate name.

& if her finger falters

on the needle,	
& if she ever needs to say	25
she hates me,	
& if she loathes poetry	
& loves to whistle,	
& if she never	
calls me Mother,	30
she will always be my daughter –	
my filament of soul	
that flew,	
& caught.	
She will come	35
in a radiance of new-made skin,	
in a room of dying men	
and dying flowers,	
in the shadow of her large mother,	
with her books propped up	40
& her ink-stained fingers,	
lying back on pillows	
white as blank pages,	
laughing:	
“I did it without	45
words!”	

LIZ LOCHHEAD

1.
Dreaming Frankenstein

She said she
woke up with him in
her head, in her bed.
Her mother-tongue clung to her mouth's roof
in terror, dumbing her, and he came with a name 5
that was none of her making.

No maidservant ever
in her narrow attic, combing
out her hair in the midnight mirror
on Hallowe'en (having eaten 10
that egg with its yolk hollowed out
then filled with salt)
oh never one had such success as this
she had not courted.
The amazed flesh of her 15
neck and shoulders nettled
at his apparition.

Later, stark staring awake to everything
(the room, the dark parquet, the white high Alps beyond)
all normal in the moonlight 20
and him gone, save a ton-weight sensation,
the marks fading visibly where
his buttons had bit into her and
the rough serge of his suiting had chafed her sex,
she knew – oh that was not how – 25
but he'd entered her utterly.

This was the penetration
of seven swallowed apple pips.
Or else he'd slipped like a silver dagger
between her ribs and healed her up secretly 30
again. Anyway
he was inside her
and getting him out again
would be agony fit to quarter her,
unstitching everything. 35

Eyes on those high peaks
in the reasonable sun of the morning,
she dressed in damped muslin
and sat down to quill and ink
and icy paper. 40

2.

What the Creature Said

The blind man did not hate me.
I saw him through the window,
through the rippling circle my own
hot breath had melted
in the spiky flowers of the frost. 5

I was exhausted,
imagine it. Midwinter. Mountains.
Forest. Dragging my bad leg
over iron ground, impossible passes,
pained by the fleshwound where 10
that villager's silver bullet
grazed me.

There he was, bent
above the hot soup, supping
his solitude from a bone spoon. 15
And when my single rap
at the glass spun him full face
towards me, mild as a cat,
my heart stopped but oh
he did not flinch. 20

Then I saw his
milky eyes stared right through me,
unblinking, and he fumbled
oddly forward to meet me at the latch.
I lifted it and entered, 25
sure that I found a friend.

3.

Smirnoff for Karloff

So you're who's been sleeping in
my bed. Well, hello there.
Long time no see.
So you're my Big Fat Little Secret
stretched out cold, 5
just between you and me.
Between you and me and the bedpost
it's getting a little crowded in here.
Roll over, let me whisper sweet zeroes
in your Good Ear. 10
Open up your Glad Eye.
Oh my! I'm going to make you.
Going to make you sit up.

Going to make you.
 Going to take you to bits. 15
 Going to take you to the cleaners.
 Going to make you look cute
 Going to let you roly-pole all over me
 in your funeral suit –
 The one you wear to weddings. Yeah. 20
 With the too short drainpipe trousers
 with the brothelcreeper boots with the
 tyre-track soles
 and the squirt-in-the-eye trick carnation
 in your button-hole. 25

You know Matron
 take more than hospital corners to keep
 a good man down, oh
 yeah. Everything
 in apple-pie order. 30
 All present
 and correct. Shipshape. Aye-aye.
 He got all my wits around him
 his extrasensory senses and his
 five straight limbs. 35
 Yes sir,
 you'll be up and about again
 in no time.

What wouldn't you
 give to love me? An arm, and a leg? 40
 Going to make you.
 make you sit up,
 sit up and beg. Hey, Mister,
 Mister can your dog do tricks? 45
 Going to make you,
 going to put you to the test,
 make you give your all six
 nights per week and on Sundays
 going to take the rest.

Sure, you can smoke in bed. 50
 It's a free country.
 Let me pour you a stiff drink.
 You're shivering.
 Well, you know what they say if you
 can't take the cold then get outa 55
 the icebox. What's that?
 Smirnoff.
 Well, you know, Mr Karloff,
 I used to think an aphrodisiac was some
 kinda confused Tibetan mountain goat 60

with a freak-out hair-do until I
met my monster and my monster
met his maker. Oh yeah.

That who been sleeping in my bed.
Same old surprise. Oh goody.
Long time no see.
Ain't going to let nothing come between
My monster and me.

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Appendix II

Transcript of *Dead Man Talking* BBC Radio 4, broadcast 25th October 2001.

Robert Oppenheimer – John Sessions

Mary Shelley – Fiona Allen

Written by Andrew McGibbon and Robert Chandler

Produced by Robert Chandler and Alison Vernon-Smith

A Wise Buddha Production for Radio 4.

JOHN BIRD: Hello, and welcome to Dead Man Talking, the show that gives us, the audience, and you, the listener, the chance each week to put questions to a pair of very special guests. They're special because you won't find them on any other chat show. In fact you won't find them anywhere, because all our guests are dead, and have been for some time. However, as Arthur C. Clarke once said, 'Behind every man now alive stands thirty ghosts, for that is the ratio by which the dead outnumber the living'. And going on the atmosphere in here tonight, I think he got it about right. So, with that, let's dive in and welcome our guests, Robert Oppenheimer, and, Mary Shelley . Robert, welcome to Dead Man Talking.

ROBERT OPPENHEIMER: Oh, it's my pleasure Jim. D'you mind if my smoke my pipe?

JB: Er, no, not at all.

RO: And my cigarettes? And my cigar?

JB: No certainly, all three, no, not at all, no...Mary, welcome to the show...

MARY SHELLEY: Yes, though it is not a pleasure to share the same air as this destroyer of futurity. Grief is my sister; everlasting lamentation is my fate.

JB: Riiight. Well, I'm really sorry to hear that.

MS: I really do not like him, sir.

JB: No. It might be more cheerful to start with you, Robert.

RO: It'd certainly be more civil.

JB: Robert Oppenheimer was the father of the atomic bomb. He was born in New York City on the 22nd April 1904. The son of a German/Jewish immigrant, he attended Harvard, New York, Berkeley, Cambridge, Utrecht, Leiden and [?] studying Latin, Greek, Physics, Oriental Philosophy, and Italian Cuisine. He also tried to

publish a book of his own poetry, but poetry was not to be his calling. Robert was destined...

RO: Have you read my poetry?

JB: Er...well... to be honest, Mr Oppenheimer, we all had a go...

RO: You know, I...I'd be delighted to help you. I...I...I always keep some of my poetry on me, y'know, for those, special moments. Now, where did I er.... Y'know, when I read them to T.S. Eliot, he just, y'know, dropped. I can't wait to read them to you.

JB: Well, you know, we just can wait to hear them. So, maybe you could read us some of your poetry near the end...

RO: Oh, OK, that would be great...

JB: ... of a completely different programme to this one . By the late 1930s, Robert had become one of the world's leading nuclear physicists. America was concerned that Nazi Germany may have had the capability to create the atom bomb, so they made Oppenheimer leader of the Manhattan Project, where he created the world's first weapon of mass destruction. Robert subsequently opposed the government's building of the first Hydrogen bomb, and found himself ostracised from the scientific community. In addition, the U.S. Army withdrew his security...

RO: D'you know, Jim, that's not entirely true. Senator McCarthy had me blacklisted, but I was able to keep up with developments in quantum physics because my colleagues found a way of exchanging information without drawing unwanted attention.

JB: Really? How did they manage that?

RO: Detailed equations on thermonuclear dynamics, we disguised as recipes for fancy dishes. My updated theory on electron spin for example was concealed within a set of oven temperatures in the recipe to make perfect meringue nests, crunchy yet chewy. Uh, plutonium enrichment, just to cite one, for this we encoded the matrices into a recipe for macaroni cheese . I'm telling you, we had a whole Jiminy Cricket cookbook of advanced nuclear science going on there.

JB: I see, fascinating, yes. Reinstated by President Johnson in 1963, Robert retired in 1966, and died in 1967. Welcome to the show .

RO: My pleasure, Jim.

MS [*quietly*]: Can I go now?

JB: Er, almost, almost.

MS: I fear you lie, and I am to be abandoned to this scheme of mutual torture. Oh, I tremble forever on the verge of annihilation.

JB: Well, I'd prefer it if you did that in private please. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in 1797. Daughter of the esteemed radical feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the political philosopher, William Godwin. Wollstonecraft, as she rather clumsily called her mother, died shortly after giving birth to Mary, and this loss was to echo through all Mary's life and work. With the deaths of three of her own children, and numerous other people around her until, everybody she knew died. Did it ever occur to you Mary that you needed to get out more?

MS: Your tone is cruel, Bird. I hope you are not suggesting those deaths had anything to do with me, sir?

JB: No no, no.

MS: Oh, it's just an unfortunate coincidence, but I'm alright now. The very excess of my misery did carry some relief from it.

JB: Yes. At the age of nineteen Mary married the Romantic poet, Percy B. Shelley. Famously, Mary took a holiday with Percy, Dr. Polidori and Lord Byron in Geneva. During the endless thunderstorms and torrential rain, Mary and her compatriots dared each other to write horror stories, with which to entertain themselves by the fireside at night. So, let us look now at the products of that thundery sojourn. Dr Polidori created a new breed of vampire...

MS: Which was terribly teenage.

JB: Byron wrote a tale to attach to one of his poems.

MS: Which was not as good as mine.

JB: Percy started something but didn't finish it

MS: Hm, he was like that

JB: Whilst you, Mary, conjured up the greatest Gothic horror novel of our age, *Frankenstein*.

MS: Yes, that's right. It is the greatest. But it isn't Gothic horror. It is an elaboration. It is a tapestry of themes and dispositions, on such subjects as the existence of doppelgangers, and evolution. It is a Moebius strip of pursuer and pursued, of Cain and Abel. 'Tis a bestseller.

JB: So, it's like a Jeffrey Archer novel.

MS: I beg your pardon.

JB: Well, except it has a monster in it. Although, in his case the author is the monster

MS: Yes. Well, as in mine, the author-as-monster theme, the author of the hideous creatura, is perhaps as hideous as the creatura [Creatura?], hence my reference to the Moebius strip.

JB: Yees. Um, do you feel you are misunderstood?

MS: Do you know, I do. People often say, 'Mary what are you talking about?' You know I am perpetually misunderstood.

RO: I know that feeling.

JB: Well, Mary, welcome to the show

MS: I thought you said it was nearly over.

JB: Yes, hang on. Now later, we have a couple of nice surprises for our guests...

MS: Oh

RO: Oh.

JB:...but not just yet. Let's take the first of our listener's questions. This is from Kevin Magwich, in New Romney in Kent. Which of you created the biggest monster? Mary?

MS: Well there you are, you see? I did not create a monster. I created a very moral being, a warning against parenting, also a warning, Mr Oppenheimer, against men of science who do not know when to stop...

RO: Mary, Mary, my dear, if I may...Scientists have a responsibility to science, we're duty-bound to see things through to the end. No matter what the consequences.

MS: No. No you don't.

RO: Hmm?

MS: I know Coleridge, who wasn't a scientist, but who would agree with me. I also knew Keats.

[MS & RO now speak together]

I knew Hazlitt. Of course I knew Byron, and he knew me. I knew Charles Lamb. I knew Goethe. I knew them all! Mr Oppenheimer, my father...

RO: I knew Schroedinger, I knew Einstein, I knew Nils Boehr. I knew Professor Stanley Unwin

MS: ...once told me that a scientist will set his own house ablaze, in order to study the passage of fire through a furnished room. Do you have any idea how many times we had to move? I wrote *Frankenstein* for people like you Mr Oppenheimer, to warn you not to go too far!

RO: My dear misguided girl. We weren't just putting together pumpkin soup at Thanksgiving. This was a hot potato race, and the Nazis already had...the melted cheese ...the uranium. We simply had to get there first. You see, Mary. You don't know about the Germans in the twentieth century, they were, uh...

MS: Don't pull that twentieth century line on me.

MS: No, no, no. Now listen. It's important you know this. They were really...bad. They were mean – they had to be stopped!

JB: Er, Robert, you didn't actually drop the bomb on Germany did you? You dropped it on Japan.

RO: Well, it seemed a shame to waste it

JB: Alright, well, the first test bomb went off in New Mexico. Now let's all try to picture this for a moment now – the blinding flash, the hollow mushroom cloud, the heatwave that followed, and the destruction all around you. You said: 'I am become death, destroyer of worlds. Anyone like some more beans?'

RO: I never said the first bit. Look, have you any idea what it's like to have the whole of history bearing down upon you? I wanted to cite one of my own poems. I'd spent all night learning it off by heart. I can still remember it now. Will you let me?

MS: This might be your chance to redeem yourself Mr Oppenheimer.

RO: I watched in wonder, as the white light washed over me. The red hot rod penetrated my.... soul. We screamed for all eternity. [*sound of Mary laughing*] I'm very sorry I mean what is funny about that?

MS: [*through her laughter*] It's dreadful. It's terrible actually [*she laughs more*]

JB: Yes, it is. So who put you up to this, 'I am death, destroyer of worlds' stuff then?

RO: The U.S. government claimed that I uttered those lines to immortalise the situation. To the best of my knowledge they were taken from an episode of Flash Gordon.

MS: Yes, you see that's very telling. I never had the pleasure of meeting this Flash General Gordon of which you speak. Those lines are taken from the [*exaggerated pronunciation*] Baghavat Gita.

RO: [*even more exaggerated pronunciation*] Baghavat Ghhheeeta

MS: The highest expression of philosophical Hinduism. I know this because my father set fire to the only English version in one of his experiments, and I managed to save those three pages.

RO: You see, they did this to Neil Armstrong when he stepped down onto the Sea of Tranquility. He had one of those tone poems all lined up to go, he'd even pasted the darned thing on the inside of his helmet. But, the U.S. government insisted that he spout all this rubbish about 'small steps' and 'giant leaps' and so forth – sooo stupid. Now let me read you what he really wanted to say: 'Silver black sand in the isolation of the big, round cold moon. Oh cold, cold my girl...'.
[Over his recitation we can hear Mary Shelley and JB saying the following]:

JB: Oh, please

MS: Oh, Mr Oppenheimer. No, Bird, make him stop. I don't want to hear it, I really don't.

JB: I tend to agree with Miss Shelley, I think you should stop now, Robert, OK? Fine. Fine, thanks, Robert. OK? Yes. Stop. Good. Now let's take another question. Sean Stirrup of West Lothian writes: 'When you're not working, what do you most like to do?' Mary?

MS: Pilates. And, I also run a donkey sanctuary in Sloane Square, for fun. Um, they're my babies. Some of them arrive in a terrible state, but I've never ever turned even one donkey away. Shall I tell you how it all started?

RO: Oh please don't.

MS: Oft we would stroll on the shores of Lake Geneva as day would roll itself into that star-bespangled duvet called night. And one night, we heard this terrible braying coming from a wood [*imitates donkey braying*] A cry for help.

RO: Oh dear.

MS: We sped to the spot and found a small donkey that had lost its left foreleg and right hindleg. We named him Two-Clops, and I fell in love with him straightaway. We dragged him across the sand and threw him in the back of our carriage and took him back to London.

JB: When you say you threw him in the back of your carriage...

RO: You know Mary I also...

JB: No, no no. Just, just, just...

RO: I also had a mule once...

JB: Just a minute. I was talking to...

RO: It was called Clement. I would drive Clement off the mule train from Santa Fe. And then Clement would carry me on his back to a special retreat that I had designed in ... [end of tape]

[tape resumes]

RO: ‘...say, pardner, you wanna give me a strip of that jerky your-a-chewing?’. ‘No senior, that is my sister, yeee-ha!’ See, that is a dude-ranch, Mary. That is where the city-folk can enjoy the pleasures of a cowboy [*French pronunciation*] *existence*. The clean, crisp morning air rolling out over the dessert. The horses [*exaggerated sniff*]. The dancing light of the camp fire...

JB: This isn’t another one of your poems is it?

RO: No, I’m simply trying to communicate the breath-taking beauty of New Mexico, Jim. Los Alamos filled me with nothing but a sense of awe and wonder. It was the most beautiful place in the world. It put me closer to God.

JB: So why d’you blow it up them?

RO: It wasn’t close enough.

MS: Have you read *Frankenstein*, my first and most famous novel, Mr Oppenheimer.

RO: Yes, of course I have, I mean, who hasn’t?

MS: Then you’ll recognise this: ‘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!’ I wrote that in 1816.

RO: I was not mocking the mechanism, but did nature create the wheel? No, man did. As a scientist, I was simply trying to...peek...at the creator’s intimate parts. I love nature. And that brings me back to New Mexico...

JB: Which rather brings me to a question about nature, this by e-mail from Penelope Boggus: ‘Is it right to tamper with nature?’

RO: Well, there’s a...

JB: Mary?

MS: No. I love nature very much. I think I love it more than Mr Oppenheimer. And I wrote about it in all my books actually. Intellectual students of literature appreciate me as one of the greatest nature writers of all time. Very similar to Wordsworth, but, um, without the useless ugly sister who did all the writing anyway.

JB: Yees. Er, Robert, were you right to tamper with Mother Nature?

RO: Well, like I was trying to say, Jim, I don’t see it as tampering. I see it as exploring. Mary is naïve to think that what we see of nature is all there is. There exists beyond our perception, a greater power. I believe it was the philosopher Immanuel Kant who identified that something intangible exists beyond what we can

see and touch, the numinal essence, as he called it. Well he called it something different, because he spoke in German. . Well, I found it. I found nature at the molecular level. And I found that it bites! I am the one who stepped through the looking-glass to reveal the greatest magic-lantern! I am the real classic Gothic Romantic here, buster! I AM GOETHE'S WERTER!

JB: You mean, Goethe's Verter.

RO: No, I mean Goether's Werter.

JB: In English we say Goethe's Verter, Professor

RO: And in Germany I say Goethe's Werter.

JB: I say Goethe's...

RO: I say Werter, you say Verter.

JB: And I say... Mary what do you think?

MS: Actually I knew Goethe...

JB & RO: Oh, god...

MS: He was a friend of my father's. And Goethe modelled Werter on my Uncle Harry Werther. So, Harry was the original Werther! You are the manner of man who desires it necessary to murder and dissect a rodent simply to establish that its heart is beating.

RO: Or, to see if he knows Richard Gere.

MS: Excuse me. But is not possible to intuit by its nibbling of fromages that it is alive? You are nothing but an ink-stained schoolboy with a hamster in one pocket...

RO: I am not...

MS:...and a firecracker in the other. And your rampant curiosity has goaded you into tying the twain together!! *[pause]* Can I not have my surprise now?

JB: In a minute.

RO: Actually, Mary, this might be a good time to bring up something that's been troubling me about your book.

MS: Really? Which book?

RO: I'm referring to Fraankenshteen Not the remainder of your canon which the reading public has the somewhat stubborn habit of forgetting. I find it scientifically disappointing in much of its descriptive detail.. When you were imagining your creature were you imagining him as a fully functioning creature?

MS: Yes, obviously.

RO: Right, right. Yet you failed to imagine his....gadget. Well, his special purpose.

JB: What are you driving at Mr Oppenheimer?

MS: Yes, to what are you referring?

RO: To his means of procreation, usually found in the junction of his legs.

MS: Oh, just come out with it you repulsive physicist. You're afraid to say 'penis' on the BBC!

RO: I am not afraid to say 'penis' on the BBC. Penis, penis, penis, penis [*and so on*]

MS: Bird, Bird! He said penis! He's a schoolboy. He's incorrigible!

JB: Alright, alright! Now stop it, stop it! Let's move on. Victoria White from North Har...Are you finished...penising? Victoria White from North Harrow wants to know 'Mary, if you ever wrote poetry?'

MS: Yes, I did. But mainly Percy did that because he was hopeless at plot, so I wrote the novels, and I also wrote the literary criticism. And the *Rambles*. And the *Biographical Essays*. Um, but I did edit a rhyming pamphlet on women's hair. Which was published in Windsor and Cheltenham. And I'm about to make a joke. There was special edition for Ulster ladies called the Londonderry Hair.

RO: I don't understand that at all.

JB: No, I don't.

MS: I'm punning of course.

JB: Oh yes.

MS: My sense of humour is often underappreciated

JB: From James Saville in Stoke Newington. 'Who do you most admire in the twentieth century?' Robert?

RO: Oh, I suppose it would have to be, Einstein, Ghandi...myself.

JB: Mary?

MS: Um, Toni and Guy.

JB: Benjamin Craven writes from South Croydon and asks Mr Oppenheimer 'Do you regret what you created?'

RO: Well, you can't wander about feeling guilty about things all the time, I mean I was also smoking a helluvalot, and having an extra-marital affair, but I didn't feel bad about that. Guilty? Why should I feel guilty? I'm proud of Fat-Man and Little-Boy.

MS: Oh, do not endow your creations with names and souls. Do you not think, Mr Oppenheimer, that we are ourselves the depositories of the evidence of the subjects that we consider?

RO: Well, you don't know. Now, look here Mary...

MS: You see he's a dullard, a dolt. He's an unpoetical half-wit. And he's hardly got any hair.

[*Together*]

RO : I have got an awful lot of hair thank you very much

MS: You see, I think I'm the best. I am the best of we three.

JB: Yes, ok, right. Let's just move on. Brenda Cop ston from Frimley in Surrey wants to know 'What you best like to be remembered for?' Robert?

RO: I guess it would be a close call between my bomb [*pause*] and my poetry.

MS: Yes, because they both possess the potential to cause infinite devastation.

RO: But I go with the bomb! Goddamit!

JB: And you Mary?

MS: I don't know, maybe, my hair.

RO: [*suppressed snigger*]. Your hair. You know, it looks just a little too good to be your hair.

MS: And what would you know about hair?

RO: Well, I know you're wearing a wig

MS: I am not.

RO: Aren't you?

MS: No.

RO: Oh yes you are.

MS: No.

RO: You know, Jim, most Victorian women wore wigs, usually made out of some hooker's hair...

JB: Steady on, Robert

MS: How dare you! It's not a wig.

RO: Oh, come on Mary, cut the crap. Everybody's dying to give it a tug, because it's not human hair at all. It's donkey hair!

MS: That is it! I am not listening to this.

RO: [*sings*] A donkey-hair wig...

MS: La, la, la, la-la, la, la....

JB: Robert! Enough!

RO: OK.

MS: la, la, la, la, la...

RO: Oh come on Mary, come on... Surely you can take a joke?

MS: La, la, la, la, la...

JB: Mary! Let's have the next question here. Neil Spedder from Helsingborg in Denmark, asks 'Which single book has had the biggest influence on your life?' Mary?

MS: La, la, la, la, la, la...

JB: Oh, Robert...

RO: Well...

MS: LA, LA, LA,

RO: Well...

MS: LA, LA, La,...

RO: Er...

MS: LAAA...

RO: Jim...

MS: I...

RO: When I was a young boy, my father used to read a great book to me every night at bed time...

MS: Laa....

RO: ...I can't remember what it was called, but er, ooh it was a great tale...

MS: Laaa...

JB: [*to Robert*] No, no carry on

RO: It was about a man who survived a plague, that...

MS: la, la, la...

RO:...wiped out the earth's population.

JB: Well, no wonder you invented the atomic bomb with that sort of bedtime reading.

RO: You know, it was remarkable story with a central character that rang so true to me, I think his name was – Lionel...

MS: What?

RO: I remember the words he spoke as clearly as if it were yesterday. It goes like this...yeah... 'Thus, around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high and the moon waxes or wanes, angels...

RO & MS together: ...and the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the supreme will, behold the tiny bark freighted with Lionel Verney...

RO: The last man...

MS: Those...they're... those are my words, Mr Oppenheimer.

RO: Huh?

MS: They're from *The Last Man*. Your father was reading my novel *The Last Man*, t-t-to you. I-I-I've never met anybody who's read *The Last Man*.

RO: You wrote those lines?

MS: Yes!

RO: You have no idea what a profound impact that book had on me! And now that I think about the images – the desolate landscape, the sole survivor – I feel sure it touched me on some deep level, I believe it's what made me want to become a scientist to try to prevent that future from ever occurring!

JB: Yes, I'm not sure that building an atom bomb was quite the way to do it

MS: Bird, do be quiet! Mr Oppenheimer, I am overcome with joy that you find so much in my book – of course, there is so much there – but do you not think that the grief at the heart of *The Last Man* perfects my narrative style and places a diadem upon my genius?

RO: Why, sure.

MS: This is exquisite Mr Oppenheimer...

RO: Oh no, no - you gotta call me Oppy. And another thing, sweet lady... You have fine hair.

JB: OK, ok, that's enough. Well now we've reached that point in the programme where we confront our guests with the last thing they'd ever expect to see.

MS: Oh! Is it time for our surprise?

JB: Eric, would you bring out the first surprise please...

[*sound effects*]

RO: God...

JB: OK, Robert there's yours...

RO: I don't believe it. Mr Bird, it can't be...How did you get your hands on this?

JB: And Mary, here's yours [*thumps in background, inarticulate human sounds*]

MS: [*gasps*] Oh! Oh, is it really you? Oh my little baby, don't cry. Isn't he remarkable? [*grunt*] Oh, is he not a hideous thing? [*grunts*] He is my argument in the nature/nurture debate [*more grunts*]

JB: Well, there they are. Ladies and Gentleman, on the left Robert's prototype of the Fat-Man bomb, brother to the one that levelled Nagasaki, and on the right, recently found, wandering unnoticed in the genetically modified wastes of Norfolk, Frankenstein's creature. Yes, it's Bigfoot, and Fat Man.

RO: Mr Bird, I haven't set eyes on this bomb, you know, since we donated it to the Smithsonian. It's just a shell now of course, we had to rip it's guts out... [*sound of bomb coming to life*] Goddamit...This thing is armed and ready to blow! What in hell's bells is going on in there?

JB: In the British tradition of fair play and friendly gamesmanship, we decided to give your creature, Mary, the task of defusing Robert's bomb . Just a bit of fun, really. You've got one minute and 30 seconds starting from now [*bell rings*]...

RO: Fun! Have you gone mad Mr Bird? This thing is for real...

JB: Oh come on now Robert don't be so ridiculous. There's no way we'd use the real thing, it's just a mock-up...

RO: It's not a mock-up.

JB: What?

RO: It's not a mock-up! It's not.

JB: Bloody hell, Robert, for God's sake, for all our sakes, for my sake – do something, will you?

RO: No way.

JB: What?

RO: No way. This is trully exciting. I was never able to see it up close before. It's very sexual.

JB: Yes, very nice, Robert, but we can't just let your Big Boy detonate, I mean it would destroy everything that we know and love!

RO: Hello boy! Daddy's home. Poppy's home. Come to Daddy...

JB: Oh come on Robert please be sensible, you gotta try and stop it!

RO: Stop it? Why do you want me to stop it?

JB: Robert, please...

RO: I'm not sure I can even remember how to disable my little boy...And with respect, Mary, I can't see your creature over there doing any better. [*grunts*]

MS: My little baby...He wants to know whether your device uses a mercury trip detonator to implode the fissionable core?

RO: What? No! No! Get away from that panel!

[*grunts from creature, sound effects*]

JB: What's he doing, what's he doing?

RO: Wait a minute, this is incredible. How is he able to understand the wiring matrix? Who told him that the loop cables have to be disconnected in sequence?

[*more inarticulate sounds*]

MS: You watched it on the Open University didn't you? Clever baby!

JB: Ten seconds!

MS: Oh, dear jewel of my heart, little honey, what have you found? Yes, he says there is something jamming up the disengaged switch.

JB: Five seconds!

RO: I can see it!

JB: Four!

RO: It looks remarkably like...

JB: Three! Two!

MS: He says it's a book of your...

JB: One!

MS: A book of your...poems!

[*sound effect of bomb being defused*]

RO: A book of my poems It was the only copy ever printed. But what a creature, Mary. And what a shame. I was quite looking forward to being consumed by Armageddon, but at least I got my poems back. It seems like an appropriate moment to...read you Armageddon Pudding!

JB & MS: Oh no...

[*monster's grunts*]

RO: Take raisins and strontium...

JB: Yeah, well what's your creature up to now Mary? It seems he's removing the wiring...

RO:...and taking out the core.

JB: He's climbing inside...

MS: Oh, does my ugly baby want to go to beddy-byes?

[*sound of Mary singing lullaby*]

JB: Not only has Frankenstein's creature defused the atom bomb, he's climbed inside it and gone to bed. I think it's safe to say that Big Boy has entered Fat Man. And on that note, let me thank my guests Mary Shelley...and Robert Oppenheimer. This is John Bird saying goodbye and do join us again same time next week.

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