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# Over Mary's Dead Body

*Frankenstein, Sexism, & Socialism*

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“A king is always a king – and a woman is always a woman: his authority and her sex ever stand between them and rational converse.”

– Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>1</sup>

On February 25, 1818, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, a close friend of Mary and Percy Shelley, wrote John Frank Newton a letter. Newton had been one of the few to receive a copy of *Frankenstein* before publication, and had shown his appreciation by enquiring of Hogg the book’s authorship – Percy, right? “[W]hen you guess the name of the author is Shelley you guess rightly,” responded Hogg, “but when you would prefix the words Percy Bysshe the infirmity of our nature interposes between you & the truth w<sup>ch</sup> whispers Mary[.] In plain terms Frankenstein ...is written by M<sup>rs</sup> Shelley .... This is a profound secret & no more to be divulged without dread than the name of D-m-g-rg-n [Demogorgon].”<sup>2</sup> Poor Newton was threatened, seriously or otherwise, with demonic retribution should he reveal the novel’s true authorship. History suggests he kept the secret to himself.

*Frankenstein* was published – with successful anonymity – in three duodecimo volumes on the first day of 1818.<sup>3</sup> At Mary’s request, Percy sent them to famed novelist Sir Walter Scott the next day, noting his “own share in them consists simply in having superintended them through the press during the Author’s absence. Perhaps it is the partial regard of friendship that persuades me that they are worthy of the attention of the celebrated person whom I have at present the honour to address.”<sup>4</sup> February’s issue of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1796), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Athenians, Being Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson Hogg and His Friends, Thomas Love Peacock, Leigh Hunt, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Others* (Golden Cockerel Press, 1943), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Jan 1, 1818, “Frankenstein Chronology,” *The Shelley-Godwin Archive*, New York Public Library and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities.

<sup>4</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley to Sir Walter Scott, January 2, 1818, “Frankenstein Chronology,” *The Shelley-Godwin Archive*.

confirmed, “The Criticism on ‘Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus,’ is received,” indicating Scott had read and reviewed the book within two months of its publication, though the review’s contents were yet unknown.

Intrigue surrounding the novel, intensified by its peculiar dedication to famous (and controversial) utopian socialist William Godwin, garnered the attention of the English cultural elite, and incited the introductory round of formal critiques. Whatever air of mystery it lent the story and however it may have bolstered public interest, the decision to publish the novel anonymously would have a significant, two-fold effect on Mary’s career and the interpretation of her work. First, if not attached to her, authorial credit must be attributed elsewhere. This moment of author-less-ness gave the English literati impetus to find one. And Percy Shelley, Oxford-educated, heir to a Sussex baronetcy, could not have been more fit for the role had he actually reanimated a corpse. Percy’s association with the novel would enduringly plague its consideration, but this misattribution is not more significant than the second effect: by not correcting the assumption of male authorship, Mary commanded a short window of merit-based review that would have otherwise been denied work of an openly female author. As yet untainted by the stains of gender bias, *Frankenstein* was presented to the public as a serious piece of literature, as a message from an individual thinker to the world. Unknown or unacknowledged, she would control the facet through which her work was viewed for the first and final time, creating for herself a brief and genuine moment of accredited authorship wholly dependent upon her anonymity.

The first review appeared in the British women’s magazine *La Belle Assemblée*, with the opening caveat, “did not the author, in a short Preface, make a kind of apology, we should almost

pronounce it to be *impious*.”<sup>5</sup> On the whole, however, the review was positive, attributing to it, “originality, extreme interest to recommend it, and an easy, yet energetic style.”<sup>6</sup> A more mixed but broadly favorable review was released the same month by *The Edinburgh Magazine* who, though claiming *Frankenstein* bore “the marks of an unpractised hand,” ultimately arrived at the opinion that, “There never yet was a wilder story imagined, yet like most of the fictions of this age, it has an air of reality attached to it, by being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the time.”<sup>7</sup> It speculated the “very extravagance” of the novel would work in its favor, and declared its “hope yet to have more productions, both from this author and his great model, Mr Godwin.”<sup>8</sup> *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* had another encouraging take. *Frankenstein* was “the production of no ordinary Writer; and, though we are shocked at the idea of the event on which the fiction is founded, many parts of it are strikingly good, and the description of the scenery is excellent.”<sup>9</sup>

In early April, the long awaited, remarkably congratulatory Sir Walter Scott review was published, commandeering the entire first seven pages of *Blackwood’s*.<sup>10</sup> The author, blessed with “uncommon powers of poetic imagination,” impressed Scott with an

original genius and happy power of expression. We shall be delighted to hear that he has aspired to the *paullo majora*; and, in the meantime, congratulate our readers upon a novel which excites new reflections and untried sources of emotion. If Gray’s definition of Paradise, to lie on a couch, namely, and read new novels, come any thing near truth, no small praise is due to him, who, like the author of *Frankenstein*, has enlarged the sphere of that fascinating enjoyment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *La Belle Assemblée, or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, 17 (London: 1818), 139-141.

<sup>6</sup> *La Belle Assemblée*, 139-141.

<sup>7</sup> *The Edinburgh Magazine*, in W.H. Lyles, *Mary Shelley: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1975), 168.

<sup>8</sup> “Review of *Frankenstein*,” *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, Vol LXXXI (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1818), 253.

<sup>9</sup> *Gentleman’s Magazine*, April 1818, in *Frankenstein*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012) 237.

<sup>10</sup> Like *The Gentleman’s Magazine* reviewer before him, Scott was particularly impressed with “choice requisites of truth, freshness, precision, and beauty” found within “his” “descriptions of landscape.” Many scholars have cited landscape descriptions as proof of Mary’s authorship, having largely come from her journal entries during their travels through the continent. It seems Scott is most impressed with the writing Percy touched least.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Scott, “Remarks on *Frankenstein*,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, No. XII (March 1818), 620.

Scott concluded, “it is said to be written by Mr Percy Bysshe Shelley, who, if we are rightly informed, is son-in-law to Mr Godwin.”<sup>12</sup> Vexed by this misattribution, Mary immediately wrote Scott: “I am anxious to prevent your continuing in the mistake of supposing Mr Shelley guilty of a juvenile attempt of mine; to which – from its being written at an early age, I abstain from putting my name.”<sup>13</sup> But Scott was far from the only one to think the author a man; masculine pronouns were in every review released in the first four months. No one reckoned the author a woman.

All would change that month, however, when *The British Critic* permanently shifted the perspective through which the novel was read; its review was the first to publicly suspect Mary’s involvement. “[T]hese volumes have neither principle, object, nor moral,” it declared. “The horror which abounds in them is too grotesque and bizarre ever to approach the sublime.”<sup>14</sup> Though admitting to “occasional symptoms of no common powers of mind,” it was the first principally negative review. Lest there be reluctance to link this change with the discovery of the author’s gender, *The British Critic* unapologetically excludes any other possibility: “The writer of it is, we understand, a female; this is an aggravation of that which is the prevailing fault of the novel; but if our authoress can forget the gentleness of her sex, it is no reason why we should; and we shall therefore dismiss the novel without further comment.”<sup>15</sup>

Reviewers once enchanted, if not slightly wary, were hereafter ruthlessly opposed. Upset by the moral (or lack thereof), dismissive of the style (or similar lack thereof), unhappy for the

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<sup>12</sup> Scott, “Remarks on Frankenstein,” 614.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 156.

<sup>14</sup> *The British Critic*, n.s. 9 (April 1818), 432-438, in Lyles, *Mary Shelley*, 168.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 432-38

sake of unhappiness – like a petulant child ashamed of being fooled by a girl.<sup>16</sup> *The Monthly Review* called the novel, “uncouth... leading to no conclusion either moral or philosophical... a serious examination is scarcely necessary for so excentric [sic] a vagary of the imagination.”<sup>17</sup> Though deeming it undeserving of serious attention, the review was still able to derive no moral – a feat requiring *considerable* mental acrobatics. Incredibly, the danger of male hubris was a lesson lost on members of every succeeding generation (the *Harvard Advocate* would claim in 1869 that the “principal moral to be derived by Harvard boys from this book is that dangerous proficiency in chemistry should be carefully avoided”).<sup>18</sup> After that, *The Literary Panorama* was “very much disappointed in the perusal of it, from our expectations having been raised too high beforehand by injudicious praises.” The review claims, “We have heard that this work is written by Mr. Shelley; but should be disposed to attribute it to even a less experienced writer than he is. In fact we have some idea that it is the production of a daughter of a celebrated living novelist.”<sup>19</sup> There would be no more reviews of this edition, with the exception of John Wilson Croker’s for the *Quarterly Review* published June 1818, claiming it “inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality; it cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers, unless their taste have been deplorably vitiated.”<sup>20</sup>

When all that was known about *Frankenstein*’s author could be condensed into “his” association with Godwin, Mary Shelley the writer – under the guise of male authority – had a crucial moment of automatic legitimacy. The facet of her character reflected by society was the

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<sup>16</sup> Some reviewers were simply in disbelief that a woman *could* write such a piece. After nearly twenty years, *Fraser’s Magazine* claimed in an 1835 review that “The publication of *Lodore* has gone a considerable way towards convincing us that Mrs. Shelley might have indeed been the author of *Frankenstein* – a work which we once believed could not possibly owe its existence to a female novelist.” *Fraser’s Magazine*, Vol. XI (May 1835), 600.

<sup>17</sup> *The Monthly Review*, N.S., 85 (April 1818), 439.

<sup>18</sup> *Harvard Advocate*, 7 (March 16, 1869), 28-29, in Lyles, *Mary Shelley*, 170.

<sup>19</sup> “*Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*,” *The Literary Panorama*, Vol VIII. (April 1818), 414.

<sup>20</sup> John Wilson Croker, *The Quarterly Review*, 18 (January 1818), 379-385, in Lyles, *Mary Shelley*, 168.

one she herself put forth: simply that of authorship. Though short-lived, this episode awarded *Frankenstein* the due respect of thoughtful consideration. With the discovery of her gender four months later, Mary Shelley was publicly and permanently demoted to a new, all-engrossing dimension: no longer Mary the author, she was Mary the woman, and her work, once profound, became unacceptable. The nuances of her public personas would change over the next two centuries to reflect the values of the societies in which her legacy remained relevant. From Mary the woman, to Mary the wife, to Mary the widow, she would be shuffled from one epithet to another, eventually arriving at Mary the Proto-Feminist Icon by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (by far the most positive title, yet still narrowly focused on her gender). *Frankenstein* was ushered out of the Salon of officially significant 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, and into the maddeningly restrictive attic of female authorship. Hereafter, scholars and critics found themselves so bound by their compulsion to undress *Frankenstein* of the influences of Mary's gender, they utterly neglected the influence of *Frankenstein* on the world.

Chastising the sexist mistreatment of *Frankenstein* without elucidating its value in fields unrelated to gender, however, does little to bring it out of the recesses of that mad attic. One such invariably overlooked field is that of then-burgeoning economic ideology. Mary Shelley, as this paper will argue, was keenly aware – both from familial tradition and personal investment – of the increasingly unjustifiable human costs of industrialization. Romantic literature as a genre is often identified by its reactionary deference for a natural world which was disappearing behind the mass of 19<sup>th</sup> century machinery. The other side of that coin, however, is too often ignored. Romantic literature, in tandem with a sublime reverence for the natural world, featured a sharp critique of the system quickly making nature obsolete: capitalism.

*Frankenstein* has tenaciously planted its feet firmly within the Romantic lesson plans of English teachers across decades.<sup>21</sup> It is a textbook example of naturalist sublimity, and yet almost never considered for its early judgements on the morality of capitalism or for Mary's clearly socialist leanings. The few exceptional considerations of Mary's contributions to political and economic ideology are problematic for their keeping with the time-honored tradition of shouting over her with misogyny: these exceptions are Marxist interpretations of *Frankenstein*. Searching so desperately for a male voice within her work, Marxist analyses willingly overlook the fact that Karl Marx was born five months after *Frankenstein* was first published. Through critical re-evaluation of popular misconceptions of Mary Shelley, close readings of *Frankenstein* for only two of innumerable socioeconomic undercurrents, and reference to the neglected personal connections between Mary Shelley and the Engels-Marx-Aveling group, this paper will argue for a fair and chronologically rational assessment of Mary Shelley's contributions to 19<sup>th</sup> century social and political thought. More accurate than a Marxist interpretation of Mary Shelley, we are long overdue for a Shelley-ian interpretation of Marx. This paper demonstrates the legitimacy and historicizes the necessity of reconsidering the impact of gendered criticism on the reception of novels by 19<sup>th</sup> century female authors. To use Mary's own words, "it is simple justice."<sup>22</sup>

### I. The Myth: The Man-Made Public Façade of "Mary Shelley"

It is not rare for scholars to divide Mary's literary career into "early" and "late" eras: early being *Frankenstein*, and late, everything else. And, though it paints a rich body of work

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<sup>21</sup> Though a bit outdated, the figure given in the introduction of *The Other Mary Shelley* is indicative of Mary's rightful place in Romantic academic consideration: "A 1989 survey of some three hundred American universities, conducted by Harriet Kramer Linkin, reports that over half of Romantics courses now include Mary Shelley." Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor and Esther H. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 342.

with an awfully broad brush, this distinction is not unsound. The young novelist who wrote *Frankenstein* was considerably changed by the time she published again. The five years between the novel's first and second editions were defined by personal tragedies. By 1822, three of her four children were dead. Mary was left to raise her two-year-old Percy Florence alone after his father Percy drowned in July, widowing her at only twenty-four.<sup>23</sup>

Though wholly rejected by English society for the decision to run away with Percy eight years earlier – a sin for which many a man had been forgiven, no atonement necessary – Mary was not free from public interest in her widowhood.<sup>24</sup> Her second piece of published literature was the short story, “A Tale of the Passions,” released in 1823 in *The Liberal*. “[I]t has done me great good,” said Mary of writing the story.<sup>25</sup> But critics were hard-pressed to find motivation to deal compassionately with Mary in her second foray into English literary culture. Though it had once published Scott's lauding review of *Frankenstein*, *Blackwood's* response to “A Tale of the Passions” was both ruthless and representative. Lest she had forgotten her widowhood, it reminds, “One should think, that a female breast, just chastised by a sad calamity, might find

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<sup>23</sup> To top it all off, Mary was in rough financial straits. There was spitefully minimal assistance from Sir Timothy, her wealthy father-in-law, who constantly teetered on the edge of death, holding on only for his hatred of Mary and desire to refuse Percy Florence the baronetcy. She was also heavily burdened with debts, many of which were her husband's youthful pledges of support to Godwin, who would sooner lose his daughter than what little money he could scrounge from her. Perennially plagued by debt and self-pity, Godwin responded to the death of Mary's son with the fatherly advice that her companions will “cease to love you, & scarcely learn to endure you,” should she continue on with such “inglorious” behavior, not warranted “because a child of three years old is dead!” William Godwin to Mary Shelley, September 9, 1819, in *Shelley's Ghost* Exhibition, MS. Abinger c. 45, fol. 18r, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

<sup>24</sup> Her recognition of this gendered double standard compelled her for the rest of her life to socially and financially support women who found themselves in similar positions. She once wrote in her journal, “If I have never written to vindicate the Rights of women I have ever befriended women when oppressed – at every risk I have defended and supported victims to the social system [ for example, Claire Clairmont, Jane Williams Hogg, Mary Diana Dods, Isabel Robinson, Ellen Manners-Sutton, Gee Paul, Charlotte Trevanion, Caroline Norton, Augusta Goring]... I do not say aloud – behold my generosity & greatness of mind – for in truth it is simple justice.” Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 342.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 232

other modes of consolation than in feeble railing against kings and gods. A grammar school, together with now and then a little polite company, would be of great use.”<sup>26</sup>

Her second novel, *Valperga*, “an undeservedly little-known work of rich Romanticism, serious philosophy and fine scholarship,” is the fictional tale of historical 14<sup>th</sup> century tyrant and Ghibelline condottiere Castruccio Castracani.<sup>27</sup> “His republican adversary would be the fictional young Countess of Valperga who gives up their love on political grounds.”<sup>28</sup> The novel, which “affirms Mary Shelley’s own love of wisdom and ‘its parent, its sister,’ liberty” is littered with ideologically-compelling and historically-constructed political arguments. “The essence of freedom” she writes, “is that clash and struggle which awaken the energies of our nature, and that operation of the elements of our mind, which as it were gives us the force and power that hinders us from degenerating, as they say all things earthly do when not regenerated by change.”<sup>29</sup> It was published on February 19, 1823, a year after Mary had given the manuscript and all its revenues to her father Godwin (who used the chance to trim passages with historical detail he believed impeded the action). Despite Godwin’s tactical use of interest in Percy’s death to time the release of the book, *Valperga*’s “old-fashioned publisher” had not marketed it as aggressively as Mary had wished, and the public’s expectation for a new edition of *Frankenstein* meant *Valperga* did not do as well as was hoped.<sup>30</sup> When the 1823 edition of *Frankenstein* was released in August, critics operating under the pretense of literary analysis re-attributed the novel to Percy, contradicting the years of vitriol Mary had endured as the previously acknowledged author. On July 31, 1824, *Knight’s Quarterly Magazine* questioned, “whence arises the extreme

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<sup>26</sup> “News From Paddy,” *Blackwood’s Magazine* (April, 1823) 392.

<sup>27</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 188.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Shelley, *Valperga: Or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, in “The Republican Tradition and Its Destiny in Valperga” by Michael Rossington, *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 116.

<sup>30</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 247.

inferiority of Valperga? I can account for it only by supposing that Shelley wrote the first, though it was attributed to his wife,—and that she really wrote the last.”<sup>31</sup>

As Mary’s widowhood faded into the obscurity of old news, her notoriety was re-anchored to her gender. Without Mary’s full consent, on January 23, 1826, *The Last Man* was published. Ending in the year 2100, *The Last Man* prophesies humanity’s apocalypse from a plague carried across the world by a global wartime explosion. “If my human mind cannot acknowledge all that is, is right; yet since what is, must be, I will sit amidst the ruins and smile,” says Lionel Verney, the only surviving human, the last man.<sup>32</sup> She had worked on the novel for years, returning to it after financial necessity forced her to write short pieces for immediate publication. “She meant to take her time to make *The Last Man* her best work yet.”<sup>33</sup> But that goal was not shared by her publisher, Henry Colburn, described by a contemporary as a man who “could not take his tea without a stratagem.”<sup>34</sup> Colburn rushed publication, leaving Mary unable to make planned revisions. Seen also in Godwin’s edits to *Valperga* and the second edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary’s authorial say was heeded by the men around her so long as it supported their tactics.

*The Literary Gazette* published its review of *The Last Man* on February 18. Though admitting “some strong imaginings,” the review could not seem to get past the question, “Why not the last Woman? she would have known better how to paint her distress at having nobody left to talk to.”<sup>35</sup> Persisting with this line of reasoning, they wrote, “Were this not written by a woman, it would be sad, vapid impertinence: as it is written by a woman, we male critics do not

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<sup>31</sup> “The Anniversary,” *Knight’s Quarterly Review*, 3 (August 1824), 195-199.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1833), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 247.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Carter Hall, *A Book of Memories of Great Men and Women of the Age, from Personal Acquaintance* (London: Virtue & Co., 1871), 155.

<sup>35</sup> “Review of New Books,” *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c. For the Year 1826*, February 18, 1826 (London: James Moyes, 1826), 102-103.

know what it is. We wish we did! Who will teach us?”<sup>36</sup> As if believing themselves thus far too coy with their thoughts on her gender, they end, “these volumes are the production of a female pen, and that we have not ceased to consider Mrs. Shelley as a woman and a widow, we shall have given the clue to our abstinence from remarks upon them. That we must deem the tale altogether to be an instance of the strange misapplication of considerable talent, is most true.”<sup>37</sup> *The Monthly Review* agreed, deeming *The Last Man* a “decided failure,” that “has merely made [Mary] ridiculous.”<sup>38</sup> The novel was, “the offspring of a diseased imagination, and of a most polluted taste. We must observe, however... [the powers of composition] are indeed uncontrolled by any of the rules of good writing; but they certainly bear the impress of genius, though perverted and spoiled by morbid affectation.”<sup>39</sup> Mary would publish a half a dozen more times in her life, and though she evolved, her reviewers did not. Most critical examination of her later work adhered to the same gendered orientation. For the rest of her career – the rest of her life – arguments legitimizing and delegitimizing her work were assembled and deconstructed on the same limited foundations: Mary was sometimes the wife, sometimes the widow, always a woman, but rarely, if ever, the author.

Mary died in 1851 of a brain tumor, leaving behind her son Percy and daughter-in-law, Jane, both of whom wanted her legacy honored appropriately. This would prove a challenge, however. Conversations surrounding her life and work in the century and a half after her death were contentious, and understanding her message was often subordinate to proving a point. Approaching the vast body of Mary’s work with the fine-toothed comb of tendentious presentism emphasized contradictory and unrepresentative aspects of her character (very few of which

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<sup>36</sup> *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*, (February 18, 1826), 102-103.

<sup>37</sup> *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*, 102-103.

<sup>38</sup> Lyles, *Mary Shelley*, 175.

<sup>39</sup> *The Monthly Review, Or Literary Journal*, n.s. 1 (March 1826), 333-335.

related to her authorship). Pseudo-scholarship of female writers is too-often born from the illusory bounds of performative gendered practices, constructing arguments that serve only to justify the impetus for writing, not to understand the result. Readiness to judge her work through aspects of her persona rather than on its own merit put biographical details at a premium in the years following her death. The perpetuation of incorrect information was exacerbated further by her life-long aversion to publishing private details – her own and those of everyone she knew.<sup>40</sup>

Mary's experience with publishing made her keenly aware that sending a work to print came hand-in-hand with male interference with the message. She also knew firsthand the consequences of exposure on the careers of women. Immediately following the death of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, her father William Godwin embarked on the *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women* – the creation of which Robert Southey, a Romantic poet himself once in love with Wollstonecraft, likened to “stripping his dead wife naked.”<sup>41</sup> As a result of his incredibly misguided but earnest endeavor to honor her memory, Godwin published explicit and private details, from her sex life to her suicide attempts. “The vicious ‘anti-Jacobin’ press, already engaged in a wholesale witch-hunt,” says Mary Shelley scholar Emily Sunstein, “made prime scapegoats of Godwin and the ‘lascivious whore’ Wollstonecraft in three years of atrocious abuse that destroyed their reputations.”<sup>42</sup> Wollstonecraft's legitimacy with contemporaries was shattered, her role as a pioneering feminist muffled for decades. Mary absorbed first-hand that devolution during her childhood.

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<sup>40</sup> When Lord Byron died in 1824, England raced against itself to produce his first biography, and “although she had known Byron far better – and could have made more than the five hundred pounds” other writers received, “she had sworn never to publish anything about him for profit.” Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 260.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Southey to William Taylor, July 1, 1804, no. 958 in *A Memoir of the Life and Writings of the Late William Taylor of Norwich*, 2 vols. (London: 1843), I:507.

<sup>42</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 19.

This aversion, however, made the onus of releasing posthumous biographical information particularly burdensome for Jane and Percy. The result of carefully guarded and selectively released details tailored toward a conservative Victorian audience meant the little material available to biographers was biased and inaccurate - this was not always a problem, however, as these biographers were not necessarily looking for accuracy. Percy and Jane sought to have finished the biography of Percy Bysshe started by Mary before her death, hoping to do her temporary justice in the process. Of the three men consulted, only the aforementioned Thomas Hogg volunteered his disastrous services. His “first two volumes, ending before Shelley’s separation from Harriet, came out in 1858, a vivid but facetious, self-servingly manipulated work that so offended Percy and Jane that they refused Hogg access to their papers for the sequel.”<sup>43</sup> The ensuing decades were catastrophic for Mary’s reputation.

A string of “biographers” looking to advance their respective agendas published lies from accounts of decades-old impressions, more often those of acquaintances than friends. Thomas Love Peacock’s “Memory of Shelley” released in *Fraser’s Magazine* over 1858-1860 perpetuated damning misinformation about Percy’s first marriage. Mary’s friend Eliza Rennie published *Traits of Character* in 1860, in which she claimed Mary “deemed it unwomanly to print and publish,” doing it only “for the hard cash which...she so often stood in need of.”<sup>44</sup> Thornton Hunt, basing his claims on the comments of his father Leigh, wrote complimentarily of Mary’s work in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863, but claimed “her early schooling was irregular.... the society of Shelley was to her a great school, which she did not appreciate to the full until most calamitously it was taken away.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth.

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<sup>43</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 389.

<sup>44</sup> Eliza Rennie, *Traits of Character; being Twenty-Five Years’ Literary and Personal Recollections. By a Contemporary* (London: Hurt and Blackett Publishers, 1860), 114.

<sup>45</sup> Thornton Hunt. “Shelley,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1863), 184-203.

It is hard to imagine the child of a pioneering advocate for female education to be a poorly educated female. These falsities, however, pale in comparison to those of Edward John Trelawny.

Trelawny, the most villainous personality of this thesis and wider Shelley historiography, met Percy and Byron in January 1822 and would have such an impact on their lives – the ends of their lives, to be precise – that historian David Crane argued he earned his place in Romanticism. “It is given to few men to kill two major poets, but the friend to whom Byron turned for his doctors and Shelley for his boat has claims to be considered one of the seminal influences on nineteenth century literature.”<sup>46</sup> Trelawny’s naval background and desire to impress the poets resulted in the boat the *Don Juan*: he chose the model, commissioned the creation, and requested the “last, fateful instructions, dangerously reducing the original specifications.”<sup>47</sup> When the *Don Juan* floundered in a Mediterranean storm killing all three men aboard, Trelawny was ashore, serendipitously poised to capitalize on Percy’s death. “Shelley’s funeral would come to seem the making of Trelawny,” said Crane, “it was his role at their deaths and not the friendship of a few brief months which gave him his apostolic authority over a generation infatuated with their memory.”<sup>48</sup>

Trelawny and Mary would correspond for years following Percy’s death. He even chose Mary to undertake the role of editing and finding a publisher for his 1830 *Adventures of A Younger Son*, to which she agreed despite “having difficulty finding a market for her own latest novel.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps it was her success that prompted him to propose to her in 1831. It is clear from

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<sup>46</sup> David Crane, *Lord Byron’s Jackal* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 46.

<sup>47</sup> Crane, *Lord Byron’s Jackal*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>49</sup> William St. Clair, the Introduction to Edward John Trelawny, *Adventure of a Younger Son* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), xii.

her response, however, that Mary was, to put it delicately, uninterested: “I am not so young as I was when you knew me, but I am as proud. . . . Mary Shelley will *never* be yours.”<sup>50</sup>

Quarrels marred the remainder of their relationship, the greatest arising from Mary’s rejection of Trelawny’s proposed biography of Shelley and Byron. Trelawny, naturally, waited until she died to publish *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Bryon* in 1858. His account of Mary in this work suggests, whatever the state of their relationship at its end, there remained for him fragments of positive memories. With “clear gray eyes and thoughtful brow,” she was “very fair and light-haired, witty, social, and animated in the society of friends” with “the power of expressing her thoughts in varied and appropriate words, derived from familiarity with the works of our vigorous old writers.”<sup>51</sup> By 1878, however, years of public irrelevance and perhaps a natural crankiness of age saw his opinions changed.

Luckily for him and unfortunately for anyone interested in veracity, he was the only living “member” of the coterie when his last account was published. His personal motivations undiscoverable, it is hard to imagine what prompted him to morph the pretty-eyed, well-spoken Mary of 1858 into the Mary of his *Record of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*. Those beautiful gray eyes were now the only features to “redeem” her from being “commonplace.” She looked so unlike her mother that “no one but a Poet with a double vision could have believed there was any relationship existing.”<sup>52</sup> This Mary “was possessed of the green-eyed monster. . . an insurmountable impediment to confidential intercourse with her husband.”<sup>53</sup> She had a “soft, lymphatic temperament” and a “capacity [that] can be judged by the novels she wrote after Shelley’s death, more than ordinarily commonplace and conventional. Whilst overshadowed by

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<sup>50</sup> Lucy Madox Rossetti, *Mrs. Shelley* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1890), 183.

<sup>51</sup> E.J. Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1858), 76, 28-29.

<sup>52</sup> E.J. Trelawny, *Record of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1878), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Trelawny, *Record of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, 22.

Shelley's greatness her faculties expanded; but when she had lost him they shrank into their natural littleness."<sup>54</sup> She was given a "perfectly orthodox" education, bereft of any reference to the beliefs of her mother.<sup>55</sup> She had "no sympathy with any of her husband's theories" and "no faith in his views." To top it off, Mary "did not worry herself with things established and could not be altered, but went with the stream. She was weak, and had no strength to go against it."<sup>56</sup> Adding insult to injury, he even claimed to have objected to the seaworthiness of the *Don Juan* (the boat he himself designed).<sup>57</sup>

When he died in 1881 at the age of 88 (no doubt sustained by the lifeblood of the characters he killed physically and artistically), he was buried, per his arrangement, next to Percy under a tombstone inscribed: "These are two friends whose lives were undivided;/ So let their memory be, now they have glided / Under the grave: let not their bones be parted, / For their two hearts in life were single-hearted." The "life" of which Trelawny speaks was, in fact, six months. "And there he is still," says Crane, "the myth he had spent a lifetime creating set now in stone."<sup>58</sup> Trelawny's ill-informed records were then treated as dependable primary source material. In true form and no time at all, historical irony saw Trelawny elevated to the status of an expert on the man he knew less than half a year, and the woman he could never have.

Not until William St. Clair's 1977 revelatory biography would the veracity of his many claims be questioned. "Though he hated and attacked with unspeakable virulence anyone who came near to uncovering his secrets," said St. Clair, he "would surely have advised boldness, and might even, I suspect, if he liked my ideas, have adopted them himself and made them true

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<sup>54</sup> Trelawny, *Record of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, 229-230.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>57</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 390.

<sup>58</sup> Crane, *Lord Byron's Jackal*, 355.

afterwards.”<sup>59</sup> In the final pages of his book, inspired partly by St. Clair’s, Crane includes, “Trelawny’s last public words: ‘Lies, lies, lies.’ He never spoke a truer word.”<sup>60</sup>

While Mary’s popularity declined during the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Percy’s was on the rise. In June of 1824, Mary published *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* – a work that took exhaustive intellectual energy and left her at odds with her already displeased in-laws. She followed with “two editions of *Poetical Works* in 1839; a volume of essays, letters, translations, and fragments the next year; and across the 1830s, the development of a mainstream audience.”<sup>61</sup> Prefaces, afterwords, biographical details and commentary only possible from Percy’s “ideal, best reader”: a body of work painstakingly constructed by the most qualified person for the job. “[H]er strategy was to attract the larger audience that had eluded him and that he so patently wanted during his lifetime.”<sup>62</sup> Her efforts made Percy - “He might have remained little known if after his death had she not gathered and edited his many unpublished poems and prose pieces, published his complete works, and vindicated his character.”<sup>63</sup> Historian Susan Wolfson argues “Mary Shelley produced ‘Percy Bysshe Shelley.’”<sup>64</sup> Shelley scholar Betty T. Bennet concurs, her “commitment to bring Shelley the notice she believed his works merited was the single, major force that established Shelley’s reputation as a poet during a period when he almost certainly would have faded from public view.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> William St. Clair, *Trelawny, The Incurable Romancer* (London: John Murray, 1977), xii.

<sup>60</sup> Crane, *Lord Byron’s Jackal*, 358.

<sup>61</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, “Mary Shelley, Editor” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther Schor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 193.

<sup>62</sup> Betty T. Bennet, “Mary Shelley’s letters: the public/private self,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther Schor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 218.

<sup>63</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Wolfson, “Mary Shelley, Editor,” 197-198.

<sup>65</sup> Betty T. Bennet, “Finding Mary Shelley in Her Letters,” in *Critical Essays on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Mary Lowe-Evans (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998).

The extent to which Mary's role as Percy's editor interfered with perceptions of her own work might have been less severe had she reserved for herself the same dedication she showed to advancing his reputation. When she set her mind to making a posthumous career for Percy, she made him a legend - a testament to her literary acumen and work ethic. At their disposal, historians and scholars had a series of fragmented, conflicting, and unflattering reviews and biographies of Mary, and a beautiful corpus of Percy's work. Though this corpus would never have existed if not for her, the historiographical discussion of Mary Shelley's contributions to literature spiraled into a self-perpetuating cycle of calumny. She was not Mary Shelley the author; she was Mary Shelley, Percy's wife (and a bad one, at that).

Her obituary, published February 22, 1851 in *The Literary Gazette*, told its audience that "It is not, however, as the authoress even of 'Frankenstein' that she derives her most enduring and endearing title to our affectionate remembrance, but as the faithful and devoted wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley."<sup>66</sup> In *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, published in 1888, Helen Moore claims that Mary's eminence came entirely from her association with Percy. "Certainly," she says, "Mrs. Shelley does not owe her fame to the extent of her literary labors."<sup>67</sup> She claims the "reason 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."<sup>68</sup> One wonders what kept Moore from titling her Mary Shelley biography, "Percy Bysshe Shelley."

Richard Garnet's Mary Shelley entry in the 1900 *Dictionary of Natural Biography* declared "Nothing but an absolute magnetising of her brain by Shelley's can account for her

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<sup>66</sup> *The Literary Gazette*, No. 1779, *Journal of the Belles Lettres* (February 22 1851), 149.

<sup>67</sup> Helen Moore, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1886), 12.

<sup>68</sup> Moore, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 10.

having risen so far about her usual self as in ‘Frankenstein.’”<sup>69</sup> In his 1936 *The Magic Plant*, Carl Grabo perpetuated the rumor begun by Leigh and Trelawny that Mary was poorly educated, sympathizing, “Mary can scarcely be blamed for her failure to comprehend all the workings of a mind far subtler and deeper than her own by the self-evident fact that she did fail to do so.”<sup>70</sup> The fact was so self-evident, it seems, Grabo forgot to support it with evidence (especially ironic for the dozen times he cites her notes as “valuable” or “interesting” insights into Percy’s poetry).

Things had changed again by 1937, when Ellsworth Barnard published *Shelley’s Religion*. No longer a legitimate public figure for her marriage to Percy, Mary now was no legitimate figure at all. On her role as editor, Barnard claims, “Mrs. Shelley’s notes are often helpful, but it is almost never safe to take them at their face value. It ought to be obvious to the student of Shelley’s life that Mary Shelley, for all her merits was quite incapable, both morally and intellectually, of understanding her husband’s opinions, let alone sharing them.”<sup>71</sup> The denigration of Mary in her Percy-related roles left her so useless that she was no longer individually legitimate. From Mary Shelley, Percy’s wife to Percy’s wife, Mrs. Shelley.

In 1944, Frederick L Jones published *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, explaining in his introduction that a “collection of the present size could not be justified by the general quality of the letters or by Mary Shelley’s importance as a writer. It is as the wife of Shelley that she excites our interest.”<sup>72</sup> Jones is particularly true to Mary Shelley historiography when he claims, “She had much to do with the establishment of Shelley’s reputation as a great man and poet; she reared and educated Shelley’s only surviving son; she continued her association with Shelley’s

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Garnett, “Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft” in *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 52*, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900).

<sup>70</sup> Carl Grabo, *The Magic Plant* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 268.

<sup>71</sup> Ellsworth Barnard, *Shelley’s Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1937), 98.

<sup>72</sup> Frederick L Jones, *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley Vol-i*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), xxix.

old friends; and she is a remarkable woman in her own right.” Of the many facets of Mary Shelley, Mary the individual always came last.

Why has the individual been so consistently overlooked? Trying to construct an understanding of Mary Shelley through what has been written about her thus far has proven ridiculous - not only fallacious, but damaging. She was sometimes a godless, amoral trouble-maker, and sometimes a brainless, quiescent wife bent on domesticity. Both a traitor to the gentleness of her gender, and one of its finest representations. An unoriginal lemming who created the most shocking novel of a generation. If anything is revealed from this preliminary look into her mistreatment at the hands of public commentary, let it be this: the best way – the *only* way – to understand Mary, is to listen to her.

## II. The Mind: Mary Shelley in Her Own Words

We have by no means lacked this opportunity to listen; the systematic devaluing of her individuality has rendered her a completely unreliable source, even on herself. Who would Mary Shelley say she was? What would a historical understanding of Mary look like, anchored in her own experience rather than anachronism or presentism? What did Mary Shelley mean by *Frankenstein*, if accorded the respect of being taken at her own word? *Frankenstein* historiography often centers on the conception of the novel - was it the intentional and profound declaration of an artist, or, in the words of 20<sup>th</sup> century historians George Levine and U.C. Knoepfelmacher “un-self-conscious and accidental?”<sup>73</sup> In all these questions, Mary’s own answer seems largely ignored. According to her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, “a discussion between Byron and Shelley on ‘the nature of the principle of life’ and on whether it might be

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<sup>73</sup> George Levine and U.C. Knoepfelmacher, *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), xiii.

possible to create a living creature gave her the idea for her story.”<sup>74</sup> Not a child crumbling under unorthodox parental pressures, not an impressionable girl molded by an artistic lover, but an observer – she was a listener who joined the conversation when she saw fit.

And Mary must have heard *a lot* of interesting conversations. Her first 16 years were spent in the household of her father, one of the most prominent political philosophers of his age, whose circle “constituted Mary’s intellectual marketplace, where she became aware of contemporary ideas.”<sup>75</sup> According to historian Gary Kelly, “She was imbued with the writings of her mother and father and their coterie of the 1790s.”<sup>76</sup> Sunstein agrees: “Living with Godwin was an education; she loved learning; he encouraged her, and gave her the background Wollstonecraft had not had and regretted having missed.”<sup>77</sup> More than encouragement, Godwin demanded critical thinking. While in Italy, away from her material, Mary wrote to a friend, “I may not call simple reading study for Papa is continually saying and writing that to read one book without others beside you to which you may refer is mere child’s work.”<sup>78</sup>

It was this vivacious intellect (and perhaps beautiful gray eyes) that won Percy over: “Shelley by all accounts fell desperately in love with Mary for the reason given by Jane Clairmont, that she had ‘great understanding and both knowledge and liking for the abstract subjects and high thoughts he delighted in.’”<sup>79</sup> And, though it would be ridiculous to say, as many have, that Percy *was* her education, their coterie provided grounds for their shared intellectual growth. Even if one were to look solely at her journals (beginning in 1814) for

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<sup>74</sup> Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott Kilvert, *The Journals of Mary Shelley: 1814-1844* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 118.

<sup>75</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Gary Kelly, “Politicizing the Personal: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and the Coterie Novel,” *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, 153.

<sup>77</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 38-39.

<sup>78</sup> R. Glynn Grylls, *Mary Shelley: A Biography* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 122.

<sup>79</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 72.

insight into the discourses that characterized her day-to-day, a revealing picture arises of the diversity of her interests and those of her group. There is planning for an “Association of political people” in Western Ireland, and debates on “oppression & reform, of cutting squares of skin from the soldiers backs.”<sup>80</sup> There is mention of “Dr. Galls System.”<sup>81</sup> The journals are remarkable testaments to the Shelleys’ diverse interests, as is their joint reading list which provides one of the most telling – and for all appearances unfiltered – glimpses into their personal, intellectual life. Naturally, Godwin’s *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* and Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (as well as *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*) made the list a few times each. Other books ranged in topic from the French Revolution (a favorite), to morality, to rebellions and civil wars in England, to memoirs of modern philosophers and a guide to political foresight. Authors included Newton, Voltaire, Gibbon, Madame de Staël, Marmontel, and Saint-Etienne. The list is diverse, confirming a broad base of interests – from despotism to phrenology.

But Mary’s own words are decidedly the most informative. Her personal writings, letters, and contextualizations of Percy’s poetry provide example after example of her political and social awareness. Discussing Percy’s humanitarianism, she herself sympathetically depicts the conditions of the town in which she wrote and edited the majority of *Frankenstein*:

Marlow was inhabited (I hope it is altered now) by a very poor population. The women are lace makers, and lose their health by sedentary labour, for which they were very ill paid. The poor-laws ground to dust not only the paupers, but those who had risen just above the state, and were obliged to pay poor-rates. The changes produced by peace following a long war, and a bad harvest, brought with them the most heart-rending evils to the poor.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Dr. Gall’s System was, in his own words, “*The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim; founded on the anatomical and physiological examination of the nervous system in general, and of the brain in particular: and indicating the disposition and manifestations of the mind.*” Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, 26.

<sup>82</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. II (London: Moxon, 1839), 377.

In fact, her praises of Percy's empathy are some of the best illustrations of her equal awareness and humanitarianism.<sup>83</sup> The same is true of her extensive letters. To her maternal half-sister Fanny Imlay, Mary described French dislike of the English with a degree of cultural understanding unusual in most discussions concerning the two nationalities, saying:

Nor is it wonderful that they should regard the subjects of a government which fills their country with hostile garrisons, and sustains a detested dynasty on the throne, with an acrimony and indignation of which that government alone is the proper object. This feeling is honourable to the French, and encouraging of all those of every nation in Europe who have a fellow feeling with the oppressed, and who cherish an unconquerable hope that the cause of liberty must at length prevail.<sup>84</sup>

A year later, in another letter to Fanny, she observes of Switzerland, "There is more equality of classes here than in England... I fancy the haughty English ladies are greatly disgusted with this consequence of republican institutions, for the Genevese servants complain very much of their scolding, an exercise of the tongue, I believe, perfectly unknown here."<sup>85</sup> But observations were not limited to her travels. Her home – which she called "very political and very poetical" – was the site of many thought-provoking conversations.<sup>86</sup> Sunstein speculates discourses on "contemporary applications of the power of the mind over Nature" and "the benefits and costs of technological progress" were material for Thomas Peacock's first novel and "fictionalized intellectual satire" *Headlong Hall*, a dialogue between characters each parodying a particular strain of contemporary ideology (there is, for example, a "Godwinian" character).<sup>87</sup>

Particularly valuable in determining Mary's political opinions concurrent with the creation of *Frankenstein* are her letters to Leigh Hunt, editor of the liberal newspaper *The*

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<sup>83</sup> Mary referenced the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, which she called "the Manchester Massacre," specifically, claiming, "The great truth that the many, if accordant and resolute, could control the few, as was shown some years after, made [Percy] long to teach his injured countrymen how to resist." Mary Shelley, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. III, 205.

<sup>84</sup> Mary Shelley to Fanny Imlay, May 17, 1816, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, ed. Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 16.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Shelley to Fanny Imlay, June 1, 1817, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Shelley to Leigh Hunt, March 2, 1817, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 105-107.

*Examiner*. Mary clearly kept up with national and international news and was invested in discussions about them, evinced by a substantial collection of letters to several people. On March 5, 1817, she complimented Hunt on his “last week’s *Examiner*, as its boldness gave me extreme pleasure.”<sup>88</sup> This was in reference to his article “Friends of the Revolution – Taxation” in which he argued that government officials “have torn the nation from its base, rooted up the sturdy peasant from his native soil, and left him to wither on its surface.”<sup>89</sup> She praised him again on March 18, but on October 14 was critical of his article “Fellow-Creatures Suffered to Die in Streets” which reported the death of a discharged seaman from exposure after three nights in Covent Gardens. “Hunt was hardly strong enough in his paper today,” said Mary to Percy, “the horror of a man’s dying in the street was represented as terrible but was it enough impressed on his reader the superabundant capacity of the spectators to have relieved him.”<sup>90</sup>

One noteworthy instance – though from 1838, 20 years after *Frankenstein* – would be an impressive show of insight for anyone (let alone a woman written off as dull and apathetic). Mary’s understanding of British politics is driven home by words of encouragement to a man characterized by Sunstein as a “then distrusted dandy”:

Benjamin Disraeli, whose first novel had impressed her and whose current *Venetia* featured heroes modeled on Byron and Shelley (Disraeli may have consulted her for it), sometimes franked her letters after his election to Parliament. ‘I wonder if you *will be* what you *can be*,’ she remarked... ‘Were your heart in your career it would be a brilliant one.’<sup>91</sup>

Mary was trained to be critical, raised an observer, generous by nature and conscious efforts.<sup>92</sup> Her father was a pioneering utopian socialist, her mother a radical for freedom from

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<sup>88</sup> Mary Shelley to Leigh Hunt, March 5, 1817, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 32.

<sup>89</sup> Leigh Hunt, “Friends of the Revolution – Taxation,” *The Examiner* (February 23, 1817), 113.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Shelley to Percy Shelley, October 14, 1817, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 54.

<sup>91</sup> Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, 339.

<sup>92</sup> Her final journal entry, on October 2, 1844, is a quote from Edmund Burke to his son, “Preserve always a habit of giving (but still with discretion), however little, as a habit not to be lost. The first thing is justice. Whatever one gives ought to be from what one would otherwise spend, not from what one wd otherwise pay. To spend little & give much, is the highest glory man can aspire to.” *Ibid.*, 367.

oppression of all sorts. She was well read, interested, sympathetic, unafraid of controversy. The years spent writing the novel were also the ones spent dodging Percy's debt collectors and pawning personal goods for food money: she was no stranger to financial hardship. Mary was acutely aware of the political and economic conditions of Europe during the *Frankenstein* years; to think this awareness was left out of the book would be to not think at all. When considered in tandem with her surroundings, her education, and her own accounts, many pioneering socioeconomic themes within *Frankenstein* push Mary to the forefront of the early critics of capitalism. When armed with even the most basic understanding of the novel, audiences who read Mary Shelley – in lieu of reading *into* her, as traditional gendered psychoanalyses are wont to do – are rewarded with a platform of early socialism. The following cursory examination of socialism within the novel reveals two particularly significant themes: the dangers of abused labor and the alienation that abused labor creates.

### II a. The Perils of Degraded Labor

Labor, especially its absence or perversion, was central to the story of *Frankenstein*. Victor himself is the product of a respectable bourgeois family functioning successfully within an essentially, if not officially, socialist environment: the ideal of wealth and eminence maintained within Godwinian voluntary communism, making a living by giving to the state, being better off for one's contributions. Of his heritage, Victor says, "My ancestors had been for many years":

counsellors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business... it was not until the decline of his life that he thought of marrying, and bestowing on the state sons who might carry his virtue and his name down to posterity.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 23.

Victor benefited directly from his familial symbiosis with the state (his birth was, in essence, a gift to it), and indirectly from the failures of capitalism. One of Frankenstein Sr.'s friends was "a merchant, who, from a flourishing state, fell, through numerous mischances, into poverty," and found himself, "in inaction; his grief only became more deep and rankling, when he had leisure for reflection...at the end of three months he lay on a bed of sickness, incapable of any exertion."<sup>94</sup> This hardship is resolved when the merchant's daughter (who herself "contrived to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life") married Frankenstein, was rescued from her circumstances, and had Victor.<sup>95</sup> He is literally the product of the saving nature of socialism, the embodiment of generosity's triumph over destitution.

This upbringing, sheltered to idyllic, is what makes Victor's break from tradition so drastic; his labors, markedly different from those of his ancestors, would be the impetus for his personal achievements and their consequences. When Victor left the safe-haven of his childhood for university at Ingolstadt, he too left the inherent generosity of a community dedicated to selflessness. Only weeks into his studies, Victor espies the opportunity for individual preeminence discordant with Frankensteinian socialist living, and witnesses the progression of his studies into "nearly [his] sole occupation."<sup>96</sup> Though himself the consequence of a long history of labor on behalf of an entity larger than the individual, of goals more humanitarian than personal glory, Victor fosters an unnatural monomania detrimental to his entire community (even the world), and ultimately himself. "After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue," he

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<sup>94</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 23-24.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

says, “I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.”<sup>97</sup> What from the outside appears frenzied academic investigation is, Victor makes clear, actually labor.<sup>98</sup>

The physical toll of the labor – as Victor is ever-eager to point out – was extensive, “a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward. I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit.”<sup>99</sup> This labor, as a force outside the control of the laborer, is reminiscent of labor within capitalism (a system of which Mary is undeniably critical, seen in the number of sympathetic characters she allows it to exploit). Labor is no longer a productive means of interacting with one’s surroundings as in the case of the Frankenstein family. Labor is an internal compulsion (the arrogance of science, the greed of capital) motivated by external amplifying factors (glory and profit, respectively); a combination so uncontrolled, it gives life to itself. Lack of moderating moral consideration – the absence of any factor to mitigate the damage of human ambition – is, as the story explicitly points out, globally harmful: “if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.”<sup>100</sup>

Attempts to abate the demands of labor are damaging for both capitalism and Victor. Technological advancement to overlook the fundamentally corrupted role of labor within these systems proves only to exacerbate the problems it seeks to mitigate. Replacement of workers with machinery – the industrialization of which so many Romantics were wary – undermines the

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<sup>97</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 40.

<sup>98</sup> A look at the original 1816-1817 manuscript of *Frankenstein* reveals a number of instances in which Percy edited out “labor” and other similar words. If anything, the predominate role of labor may have been de-emphasized in the editing process by the time it arrived at the 1818 published draft. See for example switch Percy’s “engaged” for Mary’s “labouring” in M.W. Shelley, “Frankenstein, Volume I” in *The Shelley-Godwin Archives*, MS. Abinger c. 56, 14r. See also Percy’s “engaged” for Mary’s “employed” in M.W. Shelley, “Frankenstein, Volume I” in *The Shelley-Godwin Archives*, MS. Abinger c. 56, 19r.

<sup>99</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 42.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

only role those workers have in a system exploiting them solely for their labor power. In the novel's case, "As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed," says Victor, "I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably [sic] large."<sup>101</sup> Victor, like the capitalist, is incapable of understanding the long-term implications of short-term time savers. Enlarging the creature ended in Victor endowing it with the destructive qualities that would ruin him.

The insatiability of this labor would devolve into a force external to the individual, ultimately enslaving the laborer. "I appeared," says Victor, "rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favourite employment."<sup>102</sup> It is noteworthy that the alternative to slavery presented by Mary is artistry, art implying inherent agency in creation; an artist is a laborer in control of her labor, production being an end in itself. This is not to say, though, that the artist is always in control of the *product* of her labor. Similarly for Victor, the end of his labor is not the end of his troubles.

It is not Victor alone, however, who will typify the hazards of all-consuming labor. The product of his labor, a reflection of himself as the laborer, will, too. Speaking of his quest to find Victor, the creature lamented, "The labours I endured were no longer to be alleviated...my toils now drew near a close..."<sup>103</sup> Victor expended so much of his being, ceded so much of himself to the process of production, it must be reflected in the product. And, when this product is sentient (unlike, say, a pie or pair of shoes), the difficulty of justifying this perverse labor is heightened exponentially. The worker is powerless to free himself, but the product –

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<sup>101</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 42.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

simultaneously the reflection and rejection of its producer – has the agency to question the system’s morality. Mary allows the aftermath to literally speak for itself.

Once contact is made between producer and product, the novel plays out in a way that would otherwise be impossible should both parties not be living (or semi-living). The message is manifest. When labor is in control of the laborer, galvanized by ambition and hubris, it is perverse. When labor is expended in self-interest at the expense of the well-being of fellow humans, it is perverse. When it is both – when it is capitalist – it is a monster.

The remainder of the novel criticizes the monstrosity of 19<sup>th</sup> century production through a cycle of malevolent transactions of labor. When Victor reneges on his promise of a female, the creature swears to “work at destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart.”<sup>104</sup> The monster follows through by killing Victor’s family, who in turn, “quitted Geneva, my first labour was to gain some clue by which I might trace the steps of my fiendish enemy.”<sup>105</sup> In places, it reads like an account book of debts of labor being transferred between producer and product. Victor explains, “The triumph of my enemy increased with the difficulty of my labours. One inscription that he left was in these words: ‘Prepare! your toils only begin.’”<sup>106</sup> One party in the exchange provides labor, and the other is obliged to match that labor contribution. This cycle, like that of mutually-assured destruction for competing capitalist producers, will only ever end when one party acts contrarily to his own desires – or dies. Naturally, as Mary doubts the ability of this system to save itself, the book ends with neither ceding anything but their lives.

Victor never questions the morality of his ambition, his initial labor, never suspects in the least any hint of evil in the production of evil. The issue, according to Victor, lies not with

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<sup>104</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 137.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

debased labor. Uttered by a man responsible for the death of everyone he loves, dying alone in the arctic, alive only on his reserve of malice, Victor's final words speak volumes to the unflappable vainglorious-ness of man: "Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed."<sup>107</sup> Victor learned nothing; the glimmer of humanity in the moments he questioned the righteousness of his actions is quickly extinguished by the arrogance of self-serving ambition. A man dying under the inescapable burden of perverse labor, using his final breath to justify it.

#### II b. Alienation as the Consequence of Degraded Labor

Though Victor himself is to blame for the lion's share of his misfortunes, his alienation provided the stage for the tragedy. Alienation is thunder to the lightning of abused labor – the natural consequence of the former, but more ominous for its invisibility. And, in systems built on corrupted labor (like capitalism), it comes in many shapes: alienation of the individual from society, producer from product, class from class. The more ensnared Victor becomes in his compulsory labor, the more it demands of him. The more he pours himself into his work, the less there is left within him. He imbues his creation with his being – his life – to such an extent that he no longer recognizes that being within himself or in the product of his labor. Victor is alienated from society, from himself, and from the result of his work.

Most fundamentally, Victor's labor would have been impossible but for his isolation. Among his family, in a community functioning through involvement and philanthropy, the level of self-interest and singular focus his task necessitated would have been unreachable. His father

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<sup>107</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 211.

explicitly links healthy labor with healthy living: ““excessive sorrow prevents improvement or enjoyment, or even the discharge of daily usefulness, without which no man is fit for society.””<sup>108</sup> Without usefulness, without the ability to be helpful, without the will to work for a goal more external than personal gratification, no man may be social. Alienation is the necessary byproduct of selfish, depraved labor. Outside the safe and restrictive confines of his socialist home, Victor was a sitting duck. “I,” says he, “who had ever been surrounded by amiable companions, continually engaged in endeavouring to bestow mutual pleasure, I was now alone. In the university, whither I was going, I must form my own friends.”<sup>109</sup> And he quite literally *formed* his friends.

For two years, Victor’s labor “secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial.”<sup>110</sup> The time he spent in graveyards and charnel-houses forced him to witness “how the form of man was degraded and wasted.”<sup>111</sup> But this melting away of all that is solid and sacred occurred in more ways than the physical erosion of his corporal materials; Victor himself was as degraded as his ties to the world outside. Victor was being alienated from Victor. This became most glaring after the act of production was finished; the current connecting Victor to his product was severed. The “Victor” he relinquished in his labors was now twitching to life in front of him, a reflection of himself with which he was now incapable of identifying. “[D]reams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space, were now become a hell to me,” he cries, “the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete!”<sup>112</sup> He runs into “the streets, pacing them with quick steps, as if I sought to void the wretch whom I feared every

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<sup>108</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 82.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

turning of the street would present to my view.”<sup>113</sup> The language itself is alienated, “as if” implying a disconnect between actions and intentions, “as if” he was incapable of understanding himself. “Ever since the fatal night, the end of my labours, and the beginning of my misfortunes,” he laments (incapable of recognizing the possibility that his misfortunes began *during* his labors), “I had conceived a violent antipathy even to the name of natural philosophy. When I was otherwise quite restored to health, the sight of a chemical instrument would renew all the agony of my nervous symptoms.”<sup>114</sup> His sole occupation, his ceaseless toils, now disgusted him. He was exorcised of the demon of coercive labor.

Victor may no longer have felt an affinity for himself, but that did not mean there was nothing in the world that did. The receptacle in which Victor poured himself was naturally quite attached. With Victor alienated from himself, his inability to identify with his creation was heightened by moral and physical disgust. The rejection was complete. “Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch.”<sup>115</sup> The undead product of dead labor – perhaps no better application of a mummy allusion than this. But not one to pass up an occasion for self-consideration, Victor continued to demonize his product while acknowledging it as his reflection: “I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind...nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me.”<sup>116</sup> (This would not be the last 19<sup>th</sup> century European commentary on deformed labor made with vampire metaphors).

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<sup>113</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 47.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

A being literally and figuratively after Victor's own heart, the creature was understandably hurt by the rejection.<sup>117</sup> "I expected this reception," it says:

'All men hate the wretched; how then must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us.... Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend.'<sup>118</sup>

It stands to reason that the being reflects the alienation experienced by its creator, continuing, "Believe me Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures who owe me nothing?" A question of moral economics – love, kindness, are things *owed*. According to the product, producers have an obligation to selflessness, even selflessness for selfish reasons (an appreciation of one's own reflection in others, for example). The benefit of compassion is expressed in similarly economic terms, as an exchange: "Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness," says the creature, "and, instead of injury, I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance."<sup>119</sup> Alienation is the sire of evil, socialism the saving grace of the unjustly unfortunate. "My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall... become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded."<sup>120</sup> When the creature is inevitably

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<sup>117</sup> The creature is the most rhetorically and linguistically skilled character in the book. Of the bulk of evidence implying Mary's identification with the creature, Mellor's example is especially compelling. Using the dates within the novel and publication years for works mentioned by the creature (specifically Constantine François Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney's 1791 pamphlet *Ruins of Empire* created during the early years of the French Revolution), Mellor reasoned, "The creature first appears before Walton's startled eyes on Monday, July 31, 17--... The only year in the last decade of the eighteenth century when July 31 falls on a Monday is 1797, the year in which Mary Shelley herself was born. The novel's final entry is dated two days after Wollstonecraft's death." Mellor, 54-55.

<sup>118</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 90-91.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

rejected, when the producer refuses the responsibility or philanthropy owed to its product, the structure of the system begins to crumble. According to Mary, the resulting tension bodes ill for the party incapable of adopting socialist tendencies, and therefore bodes ill for Victor. The monster threatens, ““You are my creator, but I am your master; - obey!””<sup>121</sup>

Mary refused to leave alienation within the realm of a gothic fantasy, however, and weaves economic inequality into the less sublime corners of the story. Her audience (then predominantly white, wealthy, and male) may well have found these moral criticisms of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe’s socioeconomic conditions as frightening as *Frankenstein*’s more classical horrors. Mary directly associates poverty with social isolation, and while a literary empathy for the poor was by no means new in 1818, her comments were not merely condolences.<sup>122</sup> Wherever she laments the state of the European poor, she accosts capitalism. Mary’s was not solely an apolitical humanitarian impulse directed toward the lowest rungs of society, but a critical examination of the system that put them there.

Mary’s sharpest criticisms are seen in the development of the creature (a being about as close to a *carte blanche* as possible). Representing an inherent, albeit crude, natural morality, the creature vacillates between complete incomprehension and disgust in its struggles to understand capitalist society. ““A considerable period of time elapsed before I discovered one of the causes of the uneasiness of this amiable family,”” it says of the De Lacey’s condition, ““it was poverty;

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<sup>121</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 162.

<sup>122</sup> Historian Lynn Hunt, in *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), argues that this thread of literary humanitarianism was tied specifically to the emergence of the novel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; this revolutionary form of empathy on a widely accessible and personally applicable scale was imperative to the development of established basic human rights. Particularly relevant to a discussion of the social impact of *Frankenstein* is historian Thomas Laqueur’s “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in his own words, an essay “that asks how details about the suffering bodies of others engender compassion and how that compassion comes to be understood as a moral imperative to undertake ameliorative action. It is about the origins of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century humanitarianism.” *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 176.

and they suffered that evil in a very distressing degree.”<sup>123</sup> This system was nowhere near immediately obvious to basic nature (human or otherwise). The creature’s confusion presents capitalism as an alienated form of living, a disconnect between the state of the world and the world’s natural state.

The creature tells Victor, “the strange system of human society was explained to me. I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood.”<sup>124</sup> Continuing, “I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of a chosen few.”<sup>125</sup> The state of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe was so contrary to rational explanation that full understanding took months for the creature. Mary grants the right of horror to the creature – a monster scared by the utter inhumanity of man.

Not all who read *Frankenstein* understood the significance of the being’s perceptive dissent, however. Even those closest to Mary tended to read Victor more empathetically than the creature. Percy Shelley was particularly guilty of an affinity for Victor that manifested itself in significant edits to the 1816-1817 manuscript.<sup>126</sup> Through both a vilification of the creature and a slightly more subliminal vindication of Victor, Percy shifts the authorial sympathy within *Frankenstein* enough to impact the implications of the story. For example, in the passage on Victor’s deferral of his wedding night, Mary wrote originally, “if [the being] suspected that I delayed it on his account he would certainly revenge himself some other way.” Percy, believing

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<sup>123</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 102.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, Percy’s edits to the manuscript that made Victor a more blameless character were the ones most consistently rejected by Mary. Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, 62-73.

this subtlety unfitting, crossed out Mary's sentence and wrote in the margin, "My destruction might indeed [sic] arrive a few months sooner but if my torturer should suspect that I postponed my marriage on account of his menaces he would surely find other, & perhaps more dreadful means of revenge."<sup>127</sup> Destruction, torture, menace, dread – attributes impressed upon the creature by Percy, attributes far uglier than any given by Mary. Later, Mary's creature reminds Victor "it is in your power to recompense me and deliver [Victor's family] from an evil which you have bestowed on them." Percy changed this to read, "Yet it is in your power to recompense me and deliver them from an evil which only remains for you to make so great, that not only you & your family but thousands of others shall be swallowed up in the whirlwinds of its rage."<sup>128</sup> Far more significant than Percy's characteristic and heavy-handed dramatic demonization, however, is his deletion of the clause "which you have bestowed upon them." Like Mary herself, her creature acknowledges that the source of the tragedy, the birth of the evil, has *already* occurred. Victor *bestowed* destruction and pain upon his family. Percy, like Victor, either unwilling or unable to recognize the evil irrevocably embedded in the processes and products of selfish ambition, displaces the blame. According to Percy, no evil act has yet been committed, nothing in Victor's behavior is yet to blame: it is still within his power to deliver them from an evil which *remains* for him to make so great.

Further insight into Percy's sympathy for Victor is seen in another minor yet telling edit. "I felt those cares and fears revive which a [sic] I had forgotten while on the water," Victor said in Mary's manuscript. Percy edited the sentence to read, "I felt those cares and fears revive which soon were to clasp me & cling to me forever."<sup>129</sup> Mary's Victor, the arrogant and unaware

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<sup>127</sup> M.W. Shelley, "Frankenstein, MS. Abinger C. 57," in *The Shelley-Godwin Archives*, MS. Abinger c. 57, 70r.

<sup>128</sup> M.W. Shelley, "Frankenstein, Volume I," in *The Shelley-Godwin Archives*, MS. Abinger c. 56, 61r.

<sup>129</sup> M. W. Shelley, "Frankenstein, MS. Abinger C. 57", in *The Shelley-Godwin Archive*, MS. Abinger c. 57, 73v.

egoist, had the luxury of forgetting the damage he inflicted when not immediately confronted by it. Percy not only endows Victor with an uncharacteristic, constant awareness, but even shields him in pitiful victimhood. Mary's narcissist is selectively cognizant of his impact on others, and Percy's sufferer is physically trapped, unable to escape from constant and acute cognizance.

Percy even went so far as to alter the end of the book to the creature's detriment. The novel was published with the final line reading: "[the creature] was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance." The creature is no longer a threat to mankind, swept away from the possibility of doing any more damage. *Frankenstein's* original manuscript as written by Mary ended with this final line: "pushing himself off he was carried away by the waves and I soon lost sight of him in the darkness and distance." Walton, the novel's outermost frame narrator, simply lost sight of the creature, which does not *actually* make it lost. Mary did not destroy her monster, did not allow it to be pulled into obscurity. She intended to finish her story with an ominous reminder to anyone who believed in the safety of an "out of sight, out of mind" perspective: though hubris may blind us to our monsters, it does not mean those monsters simply disappear.

Frankenstein's monster had not won, but it certainly had not lost. Mary left slightly ajar the door of hope for the oppressed, the entry to freedom so long blocked by powerful men. Percy, something of a powerful man himself, had other ideas. With the alteration to the final line, Percy pushed the creature into the safe bounds of unobtrusive periphery. With his ending, Percy softly shut that door of possibility, kissed the foreheads of the frightened Waltons to whom he read this bed-time story, and assured them that, no, such horrors do not truly exist.

These Waltons, and those who believed their words without question, were responsible for turning Mary into an unattractive, unfeeling, unthinking dullard - undeserving of any right to

speak. So thorough were they in their disparagement that popular opinion has only recently begun to change due to the efforts of scholars invested in unmasking the formidable person buried beneath two centuries of mistreatment. Much, even most, of what was said about Mary was revealed to be untrue. Might the things said about *Frankenstein* be inaccurate, as well? Nominally, *Frankenstein* was intellectually and artistically a failure (or at least it was when written by a woman), but according to nominal characterizations, so was Mary. The latter assertion has proven untrue. If we look again at the former assertion, that *Frankenstein* was amoral, or immoral, or worst of all ineffectual, might that claim also crumble? What was the actual, substantive impact of *Frankenstein*? Could either of these aforementioned themes – or any number of the other impactful and pioneering arguments in the novel – have had an influence on those familiar with Mary and her work?

### III. The Muse: the Mary of “Shelley and Socialism”

On July 30, 1839, the nineteen-year-old Friedrich Engels wrote a letter to his childhood friend Friedrich Graeber in which, among endearingly jocular bursts of ideology and politics, Engels makes a bet. “Look,” he says, “if you refute Börne’s essay on [the play *William Tell* by Friedrich Schiller] then you can have all the royalties I am hoping to get for my translation of Shelley.”<sup>130</sup> Whether or not Graeber succeeded at his end of the wager, he never got the royalties. This letter is Engels’ first in a string of correspondences concerning Percy Shelley, an opening glimpse into a lifetime of artistic admiration. Earlier than July 30, 1839, Engels had begun a translation of Percy’s poetry (and, given the bet, seemed to have counted on its publication prematurely). On June 18, 1840, nearly a year later, Engels mentioned the project

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<sup>130</sup> Friedrich Engels to Friedrich Graeber, July 30, 1839, in *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 2 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 464.

again. “Now concerning our Shelley-plan,” he tells Levin Schücking, “had a talk with Schünemann straight away yesterday”:

[A]t the mention of the fee of ten talers he shrank back as if struck by lightning and said at once he could not take it on.... These stupid bookseller people believe they risk less on a commentary on the epistles of John, which costs perhaps two talers in fees and is badly produced, and will perhaps be bought by 20 students at most, than on Shelley, for which production and fees may cost relatively three times as much, but in which the whole nation will take an interest.<sup>131</sup>

Despite these, apparently unheeded, attempts to convince Schünemann that “it was not child’s play to translate Shelley,” Engels was certain “this failure should by no means discourage us; if one will not do it, another will.”<sup>132</sup> On July 2, Engels wrote Schücking a more detailed plan for finding a publisher (while also conveying news of the most recent rejections). In it, Engels considers fees, publishing styles, his own lack of experience writing for any other medium but journals; the energy spent during this multi-year project was not insignificant, fueled clearly by a lasting appreciation for Percy Shelley. “No doubt,” says Engels biographer Tristram Hunt, “the office-bound Engels was excited by the heroics of Shelley’s rebellious, priapic lifestyle; the breach with his reactionary father, the doomed love affairs, and the devil-may-care romantic bravado.”<sup>133</sup> This excitement inspired Engels to advocate for Shelley well into the 1840s.

In his 1840 essay “Landscapes,” Engels lamented that poems with “sincerity of feeling, a tenderness and originality in the depiction of nature such as only Shelley can achieve... pass away without leaving a trace. Anyone, however, who is prepared to read them rather more slowly than usual... could very well find that their beauty prevents him from going to sleep!”<sup>134</sup>

In 1843, Engels congratulated “Byron and Shelley [who] are read almost exclusively by the

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<sup>131</sup> Friedrich Engels to Levin Schücking, June 18, 1840, in *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 494.

<sup>132</sup> Friedrich Engels to Levin Schücking, June 18, 1840, 494.

<sup>133</sup> Tristram Hunt, *Marx’s General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 30.

<sup>134</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Landscapes,” in *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 101.

lower classes; no ‘respectable’ person could have the works of the latter on his desk without his coming into the most terrible disrepute. It remains true: blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>135</sup> His 1844 *Conditions of the Working Class in England* praised “Shelley, the genius, the prophet” for works that “have done wonders for the education of the proletariat.”<sup>136</sup> In February of 1845, before an audience of Elberfeld political and industrial bigwigs (from directors of local manufacturing to the Attorney General), Engels held the first of a series of informational discussions on communism, which he opened with a reading of Shelley.<sup>137</sup> Percy Shelley was so predominant in Engels’ mid-1840s ideological development that Engels would boast years later, “at the time ‘we all knew Shelley by heart.’”<sup>138</sup> But, for all his memorizations, for all his righteous indignation at the stupidity of publishers, for all his sustained efforts and admiration in print and in person, Engels would not find a publisher for his long-desired translation.

Not find a publisher, that is, until 1888. Half a century had elapsed since his first attempts, but his love for Percy’s poetry never waned. When approached by prominent English socialists Eleanor and Edward Aveling for help with translations in their essay “Shelley and Socialism,” Engels finally had the opportunity denied him by those blasted literary bankrollers of 1840. And, though there were fewer translations included in the essay than Engels may have liked, “Shelley and Socialism” was the adjudication of an argument he had made for years: Percy was a socialist. Eleanor argues Shelley expressed six essential symptoms of socialism in his

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<sup>135</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Letters from London,” May 3, 1843 in *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 380.

<sup>136</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892), 240.

<sup>137</sup> Hunt, *Marx’s General*, 121.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

poetry. Citing a wide range of his work, Eleanor and Edward ultimately conclude, “the teaching of Socialism, whether it is right or wrong, is also that of Shelley. We claim him as a Socialist.”

Shelley had struck a chord with a new, radicalized post-Romantic generation, finding vocal support among Engels’ close friends. Eleanor’s father was one such famously close friend of Engels who himself had an admiration for Percy that – while perhaps not equal to that of Engels – was considerable for a person so prodigious in criticism. Karl Marx, we are told, “understood the poets as well as he understood the philosophers and economists,” and was “wont to say”:

‘The real difference between Byron and Shelley is this: those who understand them and love them rejoice that Byron died at thirty-six, because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary bourgeois; they grieve that Shelley died at twenty-nine, because he was essentially a revolutionist, and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of Socialism.’<sup>139</sup>

There is one brief argument within this already comparatively overlooked piece of writing, however, with far more radical implications than Percy’s socialist tendencies (which were, in actuality, no huge secret by 1888). “[S]carcely too much can be made, of the influence of Godwin’s writings on Shelley,” say the authors, “But not enough has been made of the influence upon him of the two Marys; Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley.”<sup>140</sup> They continue, “All through his work this oneness with his wife shines out....In the dedication to the history of their suffering, their work, their struggle, their triumph and their love, Mary is ‘his own heart’s home, his dear friend.’”<sup>141</sup> The young Engels had previously made a similar (though less empowering) claim in “Landscapes,” deciding, “Religious independence is an awkward matter for women. Persons like...Mistress Shelley are rare; it is only too easy for doubt to corrode the feminine mind and raise the intellect to a power which it ought not to have in any

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<sup>139</sup> Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx-Aveling, “Shelley and Socialism,” *To-day: Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism*, no. 53 (April 1888), 105.

<sup>140</sup> Aveling, “Shelley and Socialism,” 109.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

woman.”<sup>142</sup> “Landscapes,” written in 1840, appeared shortly after Mary published two editions of *Poetical Works* of Percy Shelley. For Engels to write in a familiar way about Mary – who had just compiled and edited the works he planned to study extensively – more than suggests his awareness of her significance to 19<sup>th</sup> century culture.

Even as early as Engels’ first letter about Percy in 1839, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which neither he nor Marx read *Frankenstein*. Though they had yet to meet, both were keen supporters of Godwin.<sup>143</sup> Marx would claim “the theory of exploitation owes its further development in England to Godwin.”<sup>144</sup> Engels would call him one of “the two great practical philosophers of latest date.”<sup>145</sup> And, as Engels had already begun his work on Percy’s poetry, he was on the lookout for what were, essentially, Mary’s publications. But more than her association with Godwin and Percy, Mary was relevant to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century European culture in her own right. When it was first published, all 500 copies of *Frankenstein* sold immediately to bookstores for further distribution. The Bentley edition of 1823 sold 3,000 of 3,500 copies within the first year. By 1860, between 7,000 and 8,000 copies of the novel were circulating in several languages (including French, beginning 1824). Even though Bentley’s tenacious copyright (which Mary had sold him for 600 shillings in 1823) prevented the price from dropping to a level affordable for most people, highly controversial and widely-attended stage adaptations starting in 1823 kept *Frankenstein* in the public eye. By 1880, the year Bentley’s copyright expired, the tidal wave of interest held back by high prices was satiated with the novel, now going for 1% of

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<sup>142</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Landscapes,” in *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, 101.

<sup>143</sup> In the sketch of Marx’s ideal socialist library, Godwin was allotted an entire shelf.

<sup>144</sup> Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writing*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 204.

<sup>145</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 528.

its original price, being printed in huge numbers. And, each edition was publicly reviewed in periodicals with which Marx and Engels were familiar.<sup>146</sup>

It is unlikely that neither men would have read the novel simply by nature of its popularity, cultural relevance, and availability. It is even *more* unlikely when the book's level of controversy is taken into account. When Mary's position as the daughter of one of their favorite socialists is considered, the chances that neither read the book grow slimmer, still. And, seeing as she was married to their favorite poet on top of it all, the slim chance they failed to read *Frankenstein* is now so slim it is nearly invisible.<sup>147</sup> But *even* if neither read *Frankenstein*, they still read Mary. Not only read her, but studied her. After all, "Mary Shelley produced 'Percy Bysshe Shelley.'"<sup>148</sup> The years Engels spent translating Percy, and winning over Marx as another (if slightly more temperate) disciple, were equally a study of the woman who made Percy possible. Every subsequent comment from any member of the Engels-Marx-Aveling clan to do with Percy was born only of their familiarity with Mary. They claimed Percy was a foundational socialist, *and* that Mary and Percy were "of one heart," *and* that Percy's biggest influences were Mary and her parents - might not it be possible that Mary, too, was a foundational socialist?

There are a handful of Marxist interpretations of *Frankenstein*, the most prominent of which is Franco Moretti's 1982 essay "Dialectic of Fear," in which he claims Mary Shelley "erases history" by subordinating demands of production to "the maintenance of the moral and material solidity of the family."<sup>149</sup> He also claims that she wishes "to exorcise the proletariat," and "erases capital from her picture too." Moretti's rendition is ill-founded on a variety of levels,

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<sup>146</sup> William St. Clair, "The Impact of *Frankenstein*," in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, 40-49.

<sup>147</sup> Undeniably, they were aware of the book as a cultural icon. In a letter to Engels on December 27, 1863, Marx writes, "a damned carbuncle had reappeared beside the furuncles" (speaking of a chronic medical issue). He concludes, "this second *Frankenstein* on my back is less ferocious by far than was the first one." Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, December 27, 1863, *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 41, 503.

<sup>148</sup> Wolfson, "Mary Shelley, Editor," 197-198.

<sup>149</sup> Franco Moretti, "Dialectic of Fear," *The New Left Review*, no. 136 (November – December, 1982), 67-85.

overlooking Mary's alliance with the creature, and substituting feminine concern about domesticity for a non-domestic attack on male arrogance. However concerned about "material solidity of the family," she was more concerned by the unchecked male ego.<sup>150</sup>

Far more problematic than these healthy academic interpretive disagreements, however, is the sheer misogynistic anachronism of it all. Rereading Mary Shelley for Marxism is the only form of economic consideration *Frankenstein* has been given – and because it fits so nicely (a monstrous proletariat, a mad scientist bourgeoisie) it is easy to believe scholars have done it well. I propose that the examination of influence and ideological evolution should be reversed, to flow chronologically. The Marx-Engels circle believed Mary a socialist, read her work, and *subsequently* wrote their influential socialist doctrine. No more Marxist interpretations of Mary Shelley. It is time for a Mary Shelley-ian interpretation of Marx.

When Mary's work was not appropriated, it was derided; when she was not considered for her gender, she was rarely considered at all. But, the truth is, she is situated far more firmly within modern culture – from classrooms, to movie theaters, to the average neighborhood block on Halloween – than any one of the people to whom her work was accredited. This endurance speaks to her brilliance; exactly two hundred years after *Frankenstein* was gifted to the world, it does not seem to be going anywhere. Given how fervently it was fought, how desperately it was scorned, how frightened it made so many, we should have expected nothing less.

Exactly how many *Frankensteins* are there? This case alone suggests that an investigation into the influence of gendered consideration on the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century female authors may

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<sup>150</sup> In November of 2017, Moretti was accused of assault by three women, all at separate universities. One of his accusers recounts his sayings, "you American girls say no when you mean yes." It is consistent, significant, and deeply troubling that someone with this record is responsible for recent influential interpretations of Mary Shelley's work. Fangzhou Liu and Hannah Knowles, "Harassment, assault allegations against Moretti span three campuses," *The Stanford Daily*, November 16, 2017.

unmask the canonical history written thus far to be something of a gothic fantasy itself. Though Mary's monster was never given a name, that appellative omission did little to incapacitate it within the realm of the story – and rightfully so. A disregarded monster is not a slain one, and invisibility is rarely absence. However disavowed, disdained, or discredited, Mary was most certainly not defeated. *Frankenstein* never allowed itself to be swallowed by the darkness of injustice or the distance of years – we just lost sight of it.

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