



Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin

*Posthumous miniature (c. 1857)
by Reginald Easton.
National Portrait Gallery, London.*

Preface

The Emotional Roots of *Frankenstein*

The publishers of the Standard Novels, in selecting *Frankenstein* for one of their series, expressed a wish that I should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story. I am the more willing to comply, because I shall thus give a general answer to the question so very frequently asked me: “How I, then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?”

—Introduction to *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, 1831 Edition

Context is everything. Countless works have explored the scientific and historical roots of one of the most enduring and influential novels ever written, but few of them have explored the psychological or emotional roots of *Frankenstein*. We know about the science of the time, the advances in chemistry and biology, the raging debates on mesmerism, vitalism, magnetism, the fascination with electricity. We know about the social revolutions that accompanied the political revolutions in America and France, firing Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and her cohorts with ideas about perfectibility. But it is not 18th century science that has kept the book in print for 200 years, but rather the profound insight into human nature that the Creature, and even Victor, present us with.

Victor Frankenstein has been depicted as a rogue, a mad scientist, or a colossal fool. I think Mary Shelley saw him as a dead-beat dad, a man who usurped unto himself not the prerogative of God, but the role of woman, and attempted to create life. But having done so, he rejects his Creature, abandoning it and trying to run away. One need not look far to discover the well of frustration, longing and alienation from which a high-spirited eighteen-year-old author drew what she later called her “horrid progeny”. There

was the cold and distant father who rejected her, the society which spurned her for her lifestyle, her sister's lover, who deserted his child. There was her brilliant and eccentric lover, who had turned his back on convention and society as it turned its back on him. As romantic as their lifestyle may have seemed to Mary, it must have dawned on her that there were flaws in their paradise of equals.

When we think of 1816, many of us think of Regency romances, Jane Austen, the end of the long Napoleonic Wars. The Regency was soon followed by the stricter Victorian Age, with its repression, conventionality, and hypocrisy. Mary and her friends were, if anything, the hippies of 1816. Free love, radical politics, and the rejection of conventional religion characterized their every choice. Fiercely rebelling against the increasingly repressive establishment culture, Mary, Shelley and their friends sought a refuge in the democratic republic of Switzerland, there to live in communal sexual and political freedom, for at least a few weeks.

But it was not the sunny refuge they longed for.

1816 was the Year Without a Summer. The lingering atmospheric effects of the explosion of the volcano Tambora in Indonesia brought on the coldest, driest summer in European memory. While Mary and her friends confronted the realities of a lifestyle at odds with convention, sorting out the sexual politics of living against the grain, the weather was nothing but terrific thunderstorms, fiery sunsets, and dark, stormy nights. On such a night, by a deep, dark lake when the thunder rolled like the voice of doom, the idea of Frankenstein was born.

Part One:

June 14, 1816

Increase of knowledge only discovered to me
more clearly what a wretched outcast I was.

—*Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus,*
Volume II, Chapter VII

Chapter I - The Famous Daughter

In my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit.

—*Frankenstein*, Volume I, Chapter III

Small and quiet, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin stood at the window overlooking Lake Geneva, called by some Lake Lemán, and looked out over the misty afternoon. Here and there, sunlight shafted through a break in the clouds, picking out a wave top, a soaring bird, even a fleeting glimpse of Geneva across the water. White sails bellying in the breeze, a small boat bounced over a wave, came about slightly to the left, and passed beyond her view.

It was not them.

She sighed. Shelley and his friend, Lord Byron, had left that morning to cross the lake to Geneva; it was now mid-afternoon. Even this brief separation from Shelley made her anxious and restless.

Her son squirmed in her arms and she looked down. At six months, William was as fair as his mother and had his father's lambent blue eyes. He grunted, gasped, and then gave out a wail, pushing at her breast with one small hand.

"Is he finished?"

Mary turned. Her step-sister Claire Clairmont, a few months older than she, lounged across a daybed, paging through an old book. She glanced up, her dark eyes half-shut with boredom. "I wish Albé had let me go with them," she said.

How odd, thought Mary. In the last few weeks, since meeting the famous poet, they had moved from the formal "Lord Byron" to the use of his initials "LB" to the pseudo-Italianate pun on his initials, "Albé". Mary adjusted her dress and put William on her shoulder, patting him gently. "I do not wonder at Byron's

reluctance to go anywhere with you, after the scene at dinner the other day.”

Claire flipped a page so forcefully she nearly tore it. “It is his fault. He treats me like a child.”

William burped gently but continued to fuss. “I think my milk may be drying up,” Mary said. “I don’t know if I should hire a wet nurse or wean him.”

Completely uninterested, Claire sighed and turned another page. “All I wanted to do was discuss poetry with him. A perfectly normal conversation between two persons who love one another. Yet he laughed at me, in front of Shelley! And that odious Polidori laughed with him.”

“Dr. Polidori always echoes Lord Byron’s sentiments,” Mary said, wiping her son’s face. She turned him around into the crook of her arm and stepped close to the wall. The wallpaper displayed a pattern of pink roses on an ivory background. “Look, Will-mouse! Aren’t the roses pretty?” She turned to look over her shoulder at her sister. “Polly can hardly do otherwise, my dear. He is, after all, merely a paid employee.”

Claire snorted. “In the pay of two masters, no less. Did you know that Murray offered him five hundred pounds to keep a journal of his travels with Albé?” Her hand toyed with a pale green ribbon decorating her yellow sprigged muslin day dress.

Mary smiled. “Absurd. John Murray is far too conventional a publisher to actually print the escapades of our dear LB.” She frowned. “Is Polly planning to write about you and Byron?”

Claire shrugged. “I care nothing for what John Polidori writes. Oh, look! Mary, do you remember this?” She turned the book towards Mary, holding it up to show her the illustration. In stark black and white, the image showed two small children lying flat in a bed, with their eyes closed and their arms straight out on either side of their bodies. A high window admitted a sickly yellow light, which fell on the immensely tall figure standing over the bed, looking down at the occupants with a crazed, fearful expression. Its hands were clenched in fists, thrust straight down in front of its body in an attitude of agonized anxiety; the dark shadows in

its tousled hair looked almost like devil's horns. Its gaze was fixed on the occupants of the bed, oblivious to the small dog jumping at its side.

"That's my mother's book," Mary said.

Claire nodded, closing the book to show the title: *Original Stories for Children*, by Mary Wollstonecraft. "Mr. William Blake is a master of the macabre image, don't you think? Do you remember when that picture used to give us the horrors?"

Mary patted her son again. "I remember that it gave you the horrors."

Her step-sister sniffed. "No need to act so superior, as if you never got them."

"But I don't. I never have."

Claire shuddered. "And you are fortunate. To be visited by those deathly visions, to feel the breath of monsters on your face, to writhe in agony—"

"Nonsense," Mary said sharply. "'Tis only your own imagination, as I have told you often. Sister, you really must resort to reason. These imaginings are best left in the schoolroom or nursery."

"You have no feeling!" Claire said. "Truly, Sister, I do not know how you can support a life based on so ... dry an outlook! At least I have an imagination!"

"Yes, a very melodramatic one." Annoyed, Mary sat down in her armchair near the window, spreading her white dress around her. She placed William in his cradle beside her chair and began to rock him.

Claire stood and strode to the window, placing a hand on one of the gold curtains. Without turning, she spoke. "Mary, I must tell you. I ... I am *enciente*."

"Jane, you know I don't speak French well. What do you mean?"

"My name is Claire! Why can you not remember?"

Preoccupied with William, Mary said, "I called you Jane for sixteen years! Last year you were Clary. Now you are Claire. What will you be called next week? In any case, I do not quite take your meaning. Did you say you were ... *ennuyee*? Bored? The

new edition of *Galignani's Messenger* is downstairs—”

“I am with child.” Claire’s tone was firm, but Mary saw that her hand on the curtain trembled.

Mary took a deep breath. Part of her was shocked—and yet part of her was not. “Surely you are mistaken, my dear! Perhaps you are only late? Or the exertions of our travels—”

“I have missed my courses.” Claire’s voice wavered a little, but she continued to stare out at the Lake where her lover’s boat bobbed, somewhere in the mist.

Mary gripped the cradle hard with one hand, a deep foreboding creeping over her. “By a week, at most—”

“This is the third month I have done so.” Claire turned and looked steadily at her step-sister. Her olive skin flushed as she met Mary’s eyes, and she glanced away.

“The third? How is this possible, Claire? You have only been sleeping with Lord Byron for three weeks!” Mary felt her skin grow cold. “Unless...not that I am jealous or any such nonsense, or with any idea of exclusivity, still, can it be you have been sleeping with ... with Shelley?”

Claire half-smiled and turned away. “Well, it would be within our philosophy, would it not, dear Mary? But no, I must say that Byron and I first ... embraced in London.”

“In London?” Mary was stunned. “You ... when you brought me to meet him ... you had already ...” Her hands fell to her lap and twined together. “You had already been with him.”

“Not yet,” Claire said candidly. “Not just then. But thereafter, yes.”

Mary stared, seeing that rainy day in London three months before, the elegant salon in Picadilly Square, Byron emerging from the shadows with his halting gait and his impish grin, taking her hand. “You used me.” Her voice sounded flat, unlike the roiling in her head, the anger rising in her stomach. “You used me, your own sister.”

Claire made an impatient gesture. “Is not utility the basis for all conduct? Of course it was no harm to you if he wanted to meet the famous daughter of the famous Mary Wollstonecraft and the

famous William Godwin.” Her voice held an edge. “Naturally, I expect you will fall in love with Byron, too. Have you not already?”

Mary reached for the shawl draped over the arm of her chair and gathered it into her lap. “In love with Byron? No, of course not. He is not ... not to my taste.” She drew the white wool over her shoulders, seeking calm, trying to focus beyond her shock.

Claire tossed her mane of dark curls. “Well, I am not exclusive, even if you are. Despite your claims of freedom in love, you cling to Shelley like ivy to a wall. Whereas I am happy to share, in freedom and love!”

She used me. “You know I have never traded on my mother’s name.”

“No, of course not. No need to, when the very mention of it engages the attention of the most famous poet in England!”

“Jane—Claire, I protest. Was there no other way to win his love, but by bartering my name? My mother’s name? I must declare I think this badly done.”

“Badly done? Badly done? Are you now turning hypocrite on me, condemning me for what you did yourself?” Claire sneered.

Mary felt sick at the thought of a scene with Claire. She hated melodrama. “No, I—”

Claire’s hands balled into fists at her side. “You cannot deny that Shelley wanted to meet you for the sake of your famous name. You will not deny that you traded on that, used it to attract him!”

Mary’s eyes flashed angrily, but she forced her voice to remain calm. “Not at all, as you know. He came to meet Godwin, not me.”

“Bad enough that our father has cut off all contact with us because you needs must elope with Shelley. Bad enough we have been harried throughout England, out of England, by Shelley’s debts. Bad enough that I am made to feel like an extra arm or leg, useless and in the way. But now when I have found love, you condemn me? You?” She cast the book into Mary’s lap. “There. Take your sainted mother’s book, your sainted mother who bore your sister Fanny out of wedlock and married Godwin against her own

philosophy! I am sick of hearing about her high-mindedness, and from you of all people!”

“Claire, what are you saying?”

“Nothing but the truth, I declare! Your mother went chasing after a famous philosopher, to make her name even greater. You have captured the greatest radical philosopher of the day, Percy Shelley. Yet when I lie down with a mere poet, you scorn me!”

Mary gasped. “No, you misunderstand! He does not love you, Claire! I only wish you happy—”

“You wish me at the devil, don’t deny it! You are merely jealous, because my lover is more famous than yours. And some day, our child will be more famous than yours! You and Shelley have your William, Byron and I will have our son, and we shall see who is the more influential.”

Aghast, Mary said, “I hardly know where to begin to disabuse you, Claire! You know that has never been our intent. You know jealousy plays no part in our—”

“Fiddle!” Claire said. “You see only what you want to see.”

Mary bit back the reply, that in fact it was Claire who blinded herself to reality. In the end she only said, “But Lord Byron does not love you, Claire! I am persuaded of it! He will not support you, or the child. What will you do?”

“You are wrong,” Claire said smugly. “Do not forget, he traveled all the way from England to be with me.”

Mary balled her fists in her lap, willing herself not to give way to temper. “This trip to Geneva was your idea, Sister. At your insistence, we came to Lake Lemman. It strikes me that rather, you have traveled all the way from England to be with him.”

Chapter II - Outcasts

But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing.

—*Frankenstein*, Volume II, Chapter IV

Mary didn't particularly like this room of the Maison Chapuis, but it would have to do. Facing north, it endured every draught of cold air this unseasonable weather offered. But it also caught the afternoon sun, which warmed the clammy room somewhat. Mary and Claire had done what they could with it. The sky blue love seat and matching chairs had been cleaned, the sideboard polished, and the curtains beaten free of as much dust as possible. But the homely look of the worn parquet, the black marks along the wainscoting from mildew stains, and the general air of shabbiness always embarrassed her. Still, it was really the only room in which they could decently receive visitors, so she made it her afternoon retreat. She sat now on this particular rainy afternoon with her embroidery in her lap, watching the water run down the panes of glass. The pallid light sloping in through the windows looked weak and ineffectual, distorted as if in a dream.

A door slamming, the sound of boots on the wooden stairs, and then Shelley calling her name. Mary turned eagerly to the door just as it burst open, and her tall, wild-haired lover strode into the room. At five feet eleven, he was above average height, slender and strong. His light brown hair fell in waves across his pale complexion, highlighting his large, vivid blue eyes. His muddy boots tracked dirt across the floor, his breeches dripped with lake water, and his waistcoat was buttoned awry, but his face shone with happiness and animation. Reaching for her hands, he exclaimed, "I missed you!" He caught her hands and kissed them, one after another.

Behind him, Lord Byron limped into the room, a scowl on his handsome face, his dark curls falling over his forehead. At five foot eight inches, he was shorter than Shelley, but his frame was more compact, even a trifle pudgy. His normally pale complexion flushed as he turned to his companion. "Damn those stairs! Polly, see if there's any brandy in this house!" His greatcoat flared around him like a cape as he shrugged it off, looked around for someone to hand it to and, finding no servant waiting to take it, tossed it over the arm of a chair.

Last into the room was John Polidori, a young, darkly handsome man of neat appearance and large, speaking eyes. Though shorter than Shelley, he was tall enough that his close fitted pantaloons showed off a fine leg. Altogether, Mary thought, he was a fine, dark-eyed man. Right now those eyes flashed at his patron. "I am not the butler, my lord," he said peevishly. "Indeed, I am not perfectly sure whether Mr. Shelley employs one." His cravat had lost its starch, and was drooping woefully under his dark coat.

"Oh, pay Byron no mind," Shelley said. He cast himself onto the love-seat and stretched his legs out before him. "Mary, can you get us some brandy? Or tea?"

Before she could answer, Claire bounced into the room from the opposite doorway, her hands full of lace. "Oh, Mary, look! These would—oh, hello!" Her manner was as artificial as it was bright.

Byron flinched slightly, turned away, and began re-arranging some bibelots on the mantle. "Never mind the brandy," he muttered. "Perhaps some mulled hemlock?"

Polidori reached into his coat pocket and drew forth some letters. "When we called for the post, we brought away a copy of Mr. Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*," he said. "He has reviewed Coleridge's *Christabel*."

Claire stretched forth a hand. "Oh, let me see! Let me see!"

Polidori bowed slightly as he handed it over. "You are an admirer of Mr. Coleridge's?"

"She's an admirer of anything that gives her a good scare," said Byron. "It gets her juices flowing nicely. Read her ten lines of

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and she'll swive for hours."

Polidori frowned. "Oh, come now—"

Claire waved a hand. "Oh, I pay no attention to you when you are in this teasing mood, my lord," she said, scanning the paper. "You would insult your own mamma when you are out of sorts." Byron looked startled but said nothing.

Polidori handed the remainder of the mail to Mary. She shuffled quickly through it, pausing at one letter with hope in her eyes. But it was a letter from Fanny, her half-sister. She felt a moment of something like panic, and then straightened. She kept Fanny's letter and handed the rest back to the doctor.

"I am afraid I saw nothing from your father," he said quietly. His sympathetic smile animated his face. "I know you are looking for a letter from him."

"Perhaps tomorrow," she said, masking her disappointment. She reached for the bell. "Will you have tea?"

"Ah, tea," breathed Shelley, his head thrown back on the love seat. "Where small talk dies in agonies."

"Quite," said Byron. "So let us have large talk. Polly, you told a good story the other night, about some doctor you'd been chatting with. Let's hear it again."

Polidori looked puzzled, then flushed. "Oh, no, really, I don't think so. Not quite the thing with ladies present."

"On the contrary," Byron said. "Exactly the thing when these particular ladies are present, and we need not pretend to be cotton-mouthed. Ah, here we are!" He smiled as the maid entered, bearing a tea tray. She put it down on the low table, ducked a curtsy at his lordship and her mistress, and shuffled out. Byron's speculative gaze lingered on her.

Mary picked up the teapot and poured a cup for Shelley. She passed it to him, saying to Byron, "Don't make poor Polly blush on our behalf, my lord."

Shelley took the cup and saucer from her and leaned back again, his long legs in front of him. "Oh, by all means, do," he said, his eyes mischievous over the rim of the cup. "I haven't blushed in at least a week. I am overdue."

Byron took his cup from Mary and stood frowning down at the tray. "No sugar again?"

Claire sidled up next to him. "Oh, my dear, you know we don't use sugar, for political reasons."

"Political reasons? The worst reason in the world," his lordship said. "Sugar don't vote!"

"No, but it's produced on slave plantations," said Mary calmly. "Therefore we abjure it. May I offer you some honey?"

"And the honey bee is clinging

To the buds; and birds are winging

Their way, pair by pair—yes, I'll take some. Damn, but this is inconvenient."

"At least we are spared the nuisance of having to take it up with the fingers," said Polidori. "I had to do so at Madame Einard's a couple of weeks ago. Nasty mess it made." No one responded to him, and he looked down into his teacup.

"It is surely absurd even for you, Shelley, to allow the contents of your larder to be dictated by events half a world away," Byron said testily. "This is taking things to an extreme."

Shelley smiled. "My dear Byron, if one is to hold a principle, one must hold it all the way. Where would you have me halt my opposition to slavery? Where should I draw a line?"

"At his lordship's inconvenience?" murmured Polidori. Catching Mary's look, he flushed and looked away.

"Of course, if at any time your lordship is desirous of sponsoring a bill in Parliament, banning the importation of slave sugar ..." Shelley's eyes twinkled at his friend.

Byron bowed over the cup. "No, thank you, unless I am allowed to do it by post. I would prefer never to set foot in England again."

Claire touched his arm. "Oh, but how will you ever see your dear little girl again? Do you mean to abandon her?"

This produced a strained silence. Everyone looked everywhere except at Byron's face, which first flushed and then paled. Abruptly, Byron turned his head away from Claire and looked at Polidori, who was effacing himself against a wall. "Come, Polly.

You have a story for us?"

"Yes, Doctor, let us have something amusing. And naughty!"
Claire folded the newspaper and placed it on the table. Shelley immediately picked it up, opened a page, and sank into intense study.

Mary stirred her tea, looking from Claire's smiling face to Byron's frowning one. She wondered when Claire would tell him about the baby. She did not think Byron would welcome the news.

Byron sipped tea and made a face. "Well, Doctor?"

Polidori shifted his feet, glanced out the window, and then looked into his teacup again. He cleared his throat. "It was more in the nature of a medical discussion," he said diffidently. "I cannot conceive that it would be of any interest whatever—"

"Polly talked to some local sawbones about priapism," Byron cut in, a sardonic grin on his face. "His proposed 'cure' for it was something like 'more of the same'. Doctrine of signatures, I imagine, or at least of amanuensis." His laugh held a bitter edge.

Polidori looked up, surprised. "More of the same? Not at all, at least—"

"But what is this 'prepism'?" Claire asked.

"An uncontrollable erection," Byron said. "A perpetual salute. A morning glory in eternal bloom. A manly swelling that will not subside. In short, an alarm cock." Delighted with his own humor, he glanced meaningfully at Mary.

Mary raised one eyebrow but said nothing. She had long since concluded that the only way to quell his lordship's freakish sense of humor was to ignore it.

Claire giggled. "Oh, that does sound ... interesting. Do tell us, Doctor! What cure did your medical friend prescribe?"

"Yes, come, Polidori. In round, solid medical terms, tell us your friend's remedy," Byron said.

Polidori placed his teacup carefully on a sideboard, not looking at anyone. "He suggested the, ah, exertion of rhythmic manual pressure on the organ until tumescence subsided."

Byron laughed out loud, rocking back on his heel. "Rhythmic manual pressure! Oh, famous! And who, exactly, is to provide this hand-gallop? Shall I someday be obliged to pay a doctor to deflate

my favorite weapon? Or shall I have Claire here trained in the art? Perhaps you could oblige with a lesson, dear Polly-Dolly?"

"You are offensive, sir!" said Polidori, his face first white, then red. "That is an outrageous —"

Claire laughed him to silence. "Oh, he is a rogue, and a damned rogue, is he not?" She jumped up and put her hand on Lord Byron's sleeve. "Come, my lord, let us be more sedate, or Polly will go off in a fit!"

"I doubt that Polly can 'go off' save in the presence of some light-skirt," sneered Byron. "He spends most of his time in the back streets when we go to Geneva." Claire giggled and he laughed with her, pleased.

Polidori stood rigid. "I protest! You know I am hunting through the bookshops!"

"Yes, but only through the naughty ones," said Byron. He turned to Claire. "He is obsessed with finding out just how vulgar and offensive the books of Europe can be. He will not rest until he has plumbed the very depths of their depravity. Why, only the other day, he dropped a book of erotic pictures on the head of an inoffensive shop girl."

"That was an accident!"

"No doubt you were distracted by the fullness of her bosom," drawled Byron. "Or were you contemplating a close examination, doctor?"

Polidori opened his mouth to retort, but catching the dangerous gleam in his employer's eye, closed it again. He turned his attention to a minute examination of an imaginary speck on his sleeve.

Byron turned to Mary. "How now, my Mary? Are you not shocked? Or were your Pantisocratic principles engaged at all?"

"Not my principles," she said coolly. "But perhaps my aesthetics. I find your laughter in rather poor taste."

The smile died on Byron's lips and his back stiffened. "Alas, I had thought you were beyond such common hypocrisy. Or am I to suppose that, having abandoned convention, you now espouse chivalry?"

“What has taste to do with either?” she said.

Polidori coughed, not meeting his employer’s eyes. “Perhaps Mrs. Shelley finds it in poor taste to laugh at the deformities of others.”

Byron’s face hardened and his eyes narrowed to a squint. “Indeed,” he snapped.

Claire stamped her foot. “Stop this! You’re baiting him, Polly! And only because you have no sense of humor!” She turned to Byron, tugging at his arm. “Come, let us go play chess. Leave him to his spite!” She stomped out of the room; Byron, his eyes ablaze, bowed stiffly to Mary and hobbled after Claire, his limp more pronounced than ever.

Polidori immediately came to sit down in the chair facing Mary. “My profound apologies, Mrs. Shelley,” he said. “I never know how to turn off his lordship’s freaks without making them worse. I thought it were better to accede to his request, knowing that your mind is too strong to take greater offense than there was in the story itself.”

Mary nodded, amused. “Well done, Polly. You apologize very nicely.”

Polidori grinned, a dimple appearing in each cheek. “Thank you, ma’am. The company of his lordship affords me many opportunities for practice.”

“Your dimples are quite nice,” Mary said, making an effort to be friendly. She rather pitied Polidori, who often reminded her of her awkward younger brother. “They make you look rather cherubic. You should cultivate them. Do the ladies at M. Odier’s appreciate them?”

Polidori blinked. “Ah. They do not have much opportunity to see them.”

“Oh, for shame, doctor. You should smile more. Do you dance the waltz at M. Odier’s? Do you like it?”

“I like it, Mrs. Shelley, but I am a trifle...constrained in that company. I never know what to expect. Everyone is so informal. And yet more formal.”

Mary poured herself more tea, offered the pot to Polidori, and

was declined. "Every land seems to have its own peculiar manners. Here, we live so quietly, I have no knowledge of, of fine society." She sipped, and said more darkly. "Indeed, I have no knowledge of any society." She looked up at him frankly, and met his open gaze. "You know how we are pariahs wherever we go. At least, wherever there are Englishmen abroad."

Polidori nodded. "I ... I have been privy to some talk. People do not always know that I am associated with you. And of course," he said bitterly, "Everyone wants to talk of Byron, Byron, Byron. I have written a play. I am a published writer. Yet I am nothing, not even a name to them. I am a star in the halo of the moon."

Mary looked pensively at the door through which her sister and her lover had disappeared. "Why is he so anxious to reinforce every prejudice the world has against him?"

Polidori shrugged. "He is a pariah, and he is proud. How else would he behave? Can you imagine him groveling for the good opinion of the world?"

Mary smiled. "I would never grovel for his, nor wish him to grovel for mine."

Polidori smiled. "And that is precisely, ma'am, why he cares for your good opinion of him, and why he so fears your censure that he anticipates it. It lets him feel as if he is in control of his reputation."

"Even if it is an evil one," she sighed.

"Very true," Polidori said. He reached for a sandwich. "Are these cucumber? How did you get them? Our cook swears they are not to be had."

Shelley threw down the paper and yawned. "Is there any toast? Where is Byron? What have you been talking about?"

Mary handed him a plate with two pieces of buttered toast. "We are discussing Albé's good opinion of me."

"He should have a good opinion of you." Shelley bit into the toast, scattering crumbs across his waistcoat. "I do, and I am not a fool."

"Has he really heard nothing of our conversation?" wondered Polidori, nodding towards Shelley.

“Oh, when Shelley is absorbed in something, you could fire cannons over his head and he would not pay you the smallest heed,” said Mary. She picked up another piece of toast and began to butter it.

Shelley munched happily, sticking his hands in his pockets and sliding down to sit on his spine. “Very true. Once, in order to test my concentration, Mary stripped herself bare and—”

“Shelley!” Half-laughing, half-serious, Mary thrust the toast at her beloved. He opened his mouth like a child being fed, and bit off a piece. “I declare, you’re as shameless as Byron,” she said. “Without, of course, half his wit.”

Shelley waggled his eyebrows at her, making her laugh, and Polidori smiled. “You two are well suited,” he said, a little wistfully.

“Thank you,” Mary said. “What news in the paper, my love?”

Shelley picked up the Examiner. “An excellent poem by a youngster named Keats. Hear:

*...the sweet converse of an innocent mind
Whose words are images of thoughts refin'd,
Is my soul's pleasure; and it sure must be
Almost the highest bliss of human-kind,*

Is that not wonderful? A very promising work.”

“I think I have heard that name,” Polidori said. He reached for the toast, but Mary drew it out of his reach and handed it to Shelley. “I think he is a medical student or some such. I fancy I may have met him at a lecture in London.”

“There seems to be a very host of hybridized poets these days,” Shelley murmured. “I look forward to the dawn of a new age. Chemist-playwrights writing dramas about sulfur. Musician-philosophers writing songs in the key of electricity. Oh, Mary, I am reminded: in Geneva I fell into conversation with a most interesting gentleman in a bookstore, who is an experimental philosopher. His English was very bad, and my German is, as you know, nonexistent. But we contrived, and he sold me a glass Leyden jar! I put it in the entry way.”

“What an extravagance!” exclaimed Polidori. “Surely Mrs. Shelley would have preferred something more practical.” He smiled at Mary. “Perhaps you should make him take it back!”

She looked at him coldly. “Shelley is free to spend his money as he pleases,” she said. Inwardly she shrank a little at the thought of their bills and creditors. But Polidori’s presumption irked her and she rose to her love’s defense. “I shall be very interested to see whatever he wishes to show me.”

Abashed, Polidori stared down into his cup. Shelley, ignoring him, rose and began to pace restlessly.

“I say, Mary, we must have Byron and Polly to dinner this evening,” he said, his gaze fixed on some distant inner horizon. He ran one hand through his long hair, which fell in disorder around his collar. “The clouds were building over Jura as we came across; maybe we will have lightning tonight.”

Polidori looked at him skeptically. “Do you seriously believe lightning is electric? That it is some mysterious fluid flowing to earth? It certainly does not give that appearance. I think it a very stupid idea.”

Shelley shrugged his lanky shoulders. “We shall see, if we are fortunate enough to have a display. Mary? Dinner?”

Her smile was a little forced. “Of course. Doctor, will you be good enough to ask Lord Byron to step back in?”

Shelley held up a hand. “No need, my dear. I’ll speak to him myself.”

Polidori rose as his host exited the room. “Thank you for the lovely tea, Mrs. Shelley. It was most refreshing.” He reached his hand forward. Automatically, Mary extended hers, and found it clasped in a warm, damp hand. *Arrivederci, signora*, he said, bowing. His lips brushed the back of her hand, he raised his face to look into hers, his dark eyes looking moist. “Most kind *signora*.”

Uncomfortable, Mary began to withdraw her hand, but Polidori clung to it. “I treasure these afternoons,” he said in a low voice. “Lord Byron is often unpleasant. At such times, your kindness is ... a balm to me.”

She forced a smile. Where was Shelley? She heard his voice

in the other room, a low laugh from Claire. She pulled her hand from Polidori's. "You are always welcome, Dr. Polidori. You and Lord Byron." She emphasized the last few words. Polidori's face fell a little, the glow in his eyes abating.

"Of course," he said. His voice held an edge of bitterness. "A star in the halo of the moon." Abruptly he bowed and stalked out of the room.

Mary drew a deep breath and picked up her embroidery again. She was making a shirt for little William, and the watery light of this room was not strong enough for her to see clearly. Suddenly a pain shot through her finger, and a red stain appeared on the cloth. She exclaimed and stuck her finger in her mouth just as Shelley strode back into the room.

"Dearest!" he said, instantly seeing her pained face.

She laughed. "Oh, it is nothing. I stuck my finger with the needle. Have they left?"

"They have." He sat and took her hand in his, kissing the wounded finger. "I told them dinner would be served at seven."

She laughed warmly. "I am sure Albé took that ill."

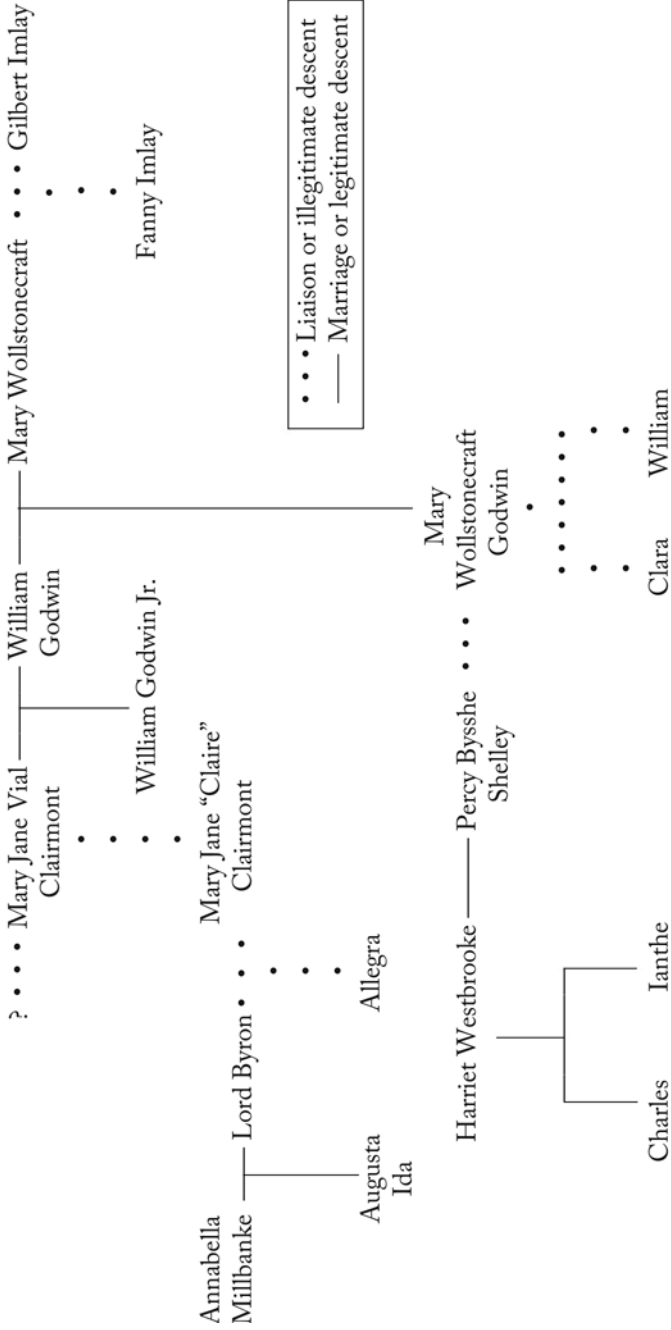
"He did. Damned me for a country squire keeping country hours. I told him in that case, dinner would be served at five."

"Perhaps you had better warn Cook."

"Don't be absurd," he said. He released her hand and reached for the paper. "Cook knows as well as you do that Albé and Polly won't be back over here before half past eight at the earliest." He glanced at her mischievously over the top of the paper. "Of course, that leaves us ample time for..." He glanced meaningfully towards the hall, which led to their bedroom.

Smiling to herself, she began to put away her sewing. "How odd. I find myself in urgent need of a nap."

Family Tree



. . . Liaison or illegitimate descent
 — Marriage or legitimate descent



ABOVE: George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron, by Richard Westall (d. 1836). National Portrait Gallery, London. BELOW: John William Polidori, by F.G. Gainsford (fl. 1805-1822), given to the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 1895.





ABOVE: Percy Bysshe Shelley, by Alfred Clint (died 1883), after an 1819 original by Amelia Curran. National Portrait Gallery, London.
BELOW: Claire Clairmont, 1819, by Amelia Curran (1775-1849). National Portrait Gallery, London.

