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VICTIM OF ROMANCE: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF FANNY GODWIN¹

In studies of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, it has become a critical orthodoxy to read off the predicament of the rejected Creature as figuring the plights of those constrained and exploited in the domains of race, class and gender, the ground being particularly well trodden in gender studies of the mother-author, Shelley herself. This essay demonstrates how an exploration of the life and death of Mary's half-sister Fanny Godwin supplies evidence for a forceful comparison to be made between the experience of the fictional Creature and Fanny, Mary Wollstonecraft's first daughter. Like the Creature, Fanny was a displaced person without legitimacy, position or name. Although she found a place and position in the Godwin family hierarchy, Romantic critical studies in the Shelley–Godwin domain have been content to characterize her as the passive victim of circumstance at the bottom of the Godwin family pecking order, denying her subjectivity and voice, and repeating the process of marginalization by consigning her to the footnotes. With such evidence as can be found, the essay seeks to convey a Fanny of more vital subjectivity whose agency and intelligent voice speak to us across history, not merely as someone who suffered and endured as an individual, but also as one whose experience and writing voice bear witness to the wider struggles of her own time—and perhaps ours too.

The Creature that Mary Shelley described as her “hideous progeny” in her author’s introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*² has been interpreted in a number of ways. No doubt, many have seen the “multiply challenged” Creature as figuring the position of the rejected, the unwanted, the abandoned and/or the marginalized in society, a pitiful character whose story at the “heart” of the novel speaks for the plights of those whose difference from a supposedly social norm makes them troublesome, awkward or embarrassing to accommodate for the more integrated and “legitimate” members of the social formation. The only clear evaluative comment that Mary Shelley made on her own novel seems to support this view, when she stated in a letter to Leigh Hunt in 1819 that: “I have written a book in defence of Polypheme – have I not?”³ In Greek mythology, Polyphemus was the one-eyed giant of monstrous

strength and appearance who fell in love with the sea nymph Galatea, but was shunned by her for his ugliness. Shelley's statement suggests that the depiction of the Creature's plight is meant to remind us that in our dealings with others, what counts quite as much as physical appearance is the reality of the feelings, of the need to have our reasonable desires acknowledged and responded to, over and perhaps even above the satisfaction of desires trained only to recognize and respond to conventional ideals of beauty or attractiveness.

It has become orthodox to read off the Creature's rejection and frustration as figuring historically contemporary frustrations in the domains of class, race and gender. The thwarting of human desires in those who were exploited, bought, sold, enslaved, colonized, appropriated, domesticated—in short, *those imposed upon and denied a legitimate name or voice*—by those privileged controllers of the naming and legitimizing processes has for some time now formed a good part of the subject matter of Romantic studies. Mary Shelley's own account of the genesis of *Frankenstein* provides exemplary material of this sort when she says that: "Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener."⁴ For what came out of that attentive silence was a novel speaking loud about the plight of the illegitimate and the nameless.

What I propose here is that there is another female in the biographical domain, within Mary Shelley's circle, whose life, persona, voice and death offer extraordinary parallels to the life, persona, voice and death of Frankenstein's Creature—Fanny Godwin. I call her Fanny Godwin, but she has also been called Fanny Imlay, Fanny Imlay Godwin, or even Fanny Wollstonecraft, in Janet Todd's view the "correct" name.⁵ In fact, Fanny had no correct surname, since her parents Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay were never married. To this troublesome—and therefore highly relevant—issue of naming, I shall eventually return. It is perhaps unfashionable to trace fictional material back to biographical sources, but in this case the parallels are so interesting—both Fanny and Mary were generated from the same Wollstonecraft womb, after all—that I have found the exploration irresistible.

1

I shall start at the end, with death, and consider two pieces of writing. In the closing pages of *Frankenstein*, the nameless Creature, deprived of his Creator and all hope in life, announces to Captain Walton his intention to commit suicide:

My work is nearly complete. Neither yours nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being, and accomplish that which must be done; but it requires my own. Do not think I shall be slow to perform this sacrifice. [. . .] I shall collect my funeral pile, and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who would create such another as I have been. I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me, or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched. [. . .] Some years ago, when the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer and heard the rustling of the leaves and the warbling of the birds, and these were all to me, I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation. Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?⁶

On 9 October 1816, as Mary Godwin was busy writing the early chapters of *Frankenstein*, Fanny Godwin, like the Creature, a figure without hope, killed herself with an overdose of laudanum in an upper room at the Mackworth Arms Inn, Swansea, leaving a suicide note which read as follows:

I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavouring to promote her welfare. Perhaps to hear of my death will give you pain, but you will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed as

And here—as the *Cambrian* newspaper of Swansea for Saturday, 12 October reported—“The name appears to have been torn off and burnt.”⁷ William St Clair suggests that the signature had been torn off by a member of the hotel staff, “who knew the indignities which the law commanded for suicides”.⁸ More important than who tore off the name are the facts surrounding her death, in particular its anonymity, and the fact that after her death no one claimed her body. This is despite the fact that Percy Shelley travelled to Swansea the day after she had been found dead, on Friday, 11 October, and stayed overnight there until the Saturday of the newspaper report in the *Cambrian*, when he returned to Mary Godwin and her other half-sister Jane at Bath, with what Mary describes in her journal as “the worst account”.⁹ It seems therefore very likely that Shelley had seen Fanny's body, with her stockings being marked—as the *Cambrian* report states—with the letter “G”, while “on her stays the letters M.W. are visible”.¹⁰ It is possible that Shelley even perhaps officially identified Fanny's remains, yet it seems unlikely. This is because, although she is thought to have been buried at St John's Church,

Swansea (rebuilt and renamed St Matthews in the 1820s), no record of her death can be found in the local parish registers for this time, whether in the name of Godwin, Imlay or Wollstonecraft.¹¹

So she died nameless, unclaimed and unwanted, evidently an embarrassment to Shelley as well as to Godwin. In a letter from her adoptive father to him that Shelley found on his return to Bath, Godwin makes it abundantly clear he wanted nothing more to do with Fanny, instructing the poet to "Go not to Swansea; disturb not the silent dead; do nothing to destroy the obscurity she so much desired that now rests upon the event."

No doubt Godwin did feel deep shock at Fanny's suicide, but a reading of the whole excruciating letter leaves us in no doubt that it was the fear of social scandal, above all, which was behind his desire to hush things up, and his instruction to an obedient Shelley not to return to Swansea to claim the body:

I did indeed expect it.

I cannot but thank you for your strong expressions of sympathy. I do not see, however, that that sympathy can be of any service to me; but it is best. My advice and earnest prayer is that you would avoid anything that leads to publicity. Go not to Swansea; disturb not the silent dead; do nothing to destroy the obscurity she so much desired that now rests upon the event. It was, as I said, her last wish; it was the motive that led her from London to Bristol and from Bristol to Swansea.

I said that your sympathy could be of no service to me, but I retract the assertion; by observing what I have just recommended to you, it may be of infinite service. Think what is the situation of my wife and myself, now deprived of all our children but the youngest [William Godwin, Jr.]; so do not expose us to those idle questions, which to a mind in anguish is one of the severest of trials. We are at this moment in doubt whether, during the first shock, we shall not say she is gone to Ireland, to her aunt, a thing that had been in contemplation. Do not take from us the power to exercise our own discretion. You shall hear again to-morrow.

What I have most of all in horror is the public papers and I thank you for your caution, as it might act on this.

We have so conducted ourselves that not one person in our home has the smallest apprehension of the truth. Our feelings are less tumultuous than deep. God only knows what they may become. The following is one expression in her letter to us, written from Bristol on Tuesday: "I depart immediately to the spot from which I hope never to remove."¹²

Although the *Cambrian* reports a fellow coach passenger saying that Fanny told them she had intended to go on to Ireland from Swansea, the

statement in her letter to Godwin makes it quite clear that the motive for her journey was to end her own life. There seem to be a number of factors behind her suicide, not the least of which may have been an oversensitive disposition to feel hurt, which she inherited from her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, who made two failed suicide attempts. The immediate occasion for it seems to have been her situation of dependency in the ever-needy Godwin household, and her capacity as Godwin's go-between in the endless and often fruitless financial negotiations that took place between him and Shelley, his errant but long-standing disciple and benefactor. Personal poverty and dependency in a household of continuing material want, for which she felt, and was probably made to feel, responsibility, were the burdensome circumstances from which, at age 22, she wished to effect a permanent escape. Add to this a lack of companionship from any source other than her letters from Mary, and the parallels with the plight of Frankenstein's Creature, who also lacked any friend, material resources, or the means of gaining recognition and a common livelihood in society, are all too apparent.

Yet things had not always been so dire for Fanny, and before returning in my final remarks to the issue of identity and naming, so crucial in English domestic politics of the post-Waterloo period, I shall explore some of the features of Fanny Godwin's life and character, from her birth on 14 May 1794.

2

Since Fanny was born in Le Havre, France, in that month, one should perhaps say that Françoise (her French registered name) came into the world in *floréal*, the name given for spring in the French Revolutionary Republican calendar. This renaming of time and season was in recognition of a supposedly new "revolutionary time"—what one writer has called a "new start for society in the era of reason".¹³ Wollstonecraft had gone to France alone in December 1792. Despite the horrors of the September Massacres, she was drawn by what Wordsworth later called the "attraction of a country in romance!"¹⁴—keen to join the small band of like-minded expatriate supporters of the Revolution in Paris. Wordsworth, who had left France just after she arrived, also recalled this time in the now famous lines: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very Heaven!"¹⁵ He was 22 then, at one in his youth with that supposed dawning of a new era, but Wollstonecraft was 33, and, as Claire Tomalin says, anxious "about her continuing state as a spinster".¹⁶ This was something she was only half joking about when writing in a letter to a friend

before her departure that: "At Paris, indeed, I might take a husband for the time being, and get divorced when my truant heart longed again to nestle with old friends."¹⁷

The new Revolutionary divorce law did indeed make such a fancy realistically possible¹⁸, but Wollstonecraft was not destined to use it, for the man she met, was seduced by, and fell in love with, told her that he had lived with other women before and that he considered marriage a corrupt institution. No doubt this appealed to the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. But, at the same time, the romantic vision she now enjoyed with her newly acquired rose-tinted spectacles perhaps meant that, as Tomalin puts it, "she had not a glimmering of worldly wisdom to suggest that this meant he held himself free to deceive and leave her too in due course".¹⁹ But this is exactly what ex-American army captain and merchant adventurer Gilbert Imlay, Fanny's father, did, within a few months of the child's birth.

It was the first disruption in Fanny's experience of family life, but it would certainly not be the last. For of all the characters who were to be crowded together in the play of that signifying chain the Wollstonecraft–Godwin–Shelley axis, Fanny is the one who would finally have the most to endure and the least to gain. What was she really like? Richard Holmes describes her as: "A small, tragic figure, destined to live only in the footnotes of the Wollstonecraft–Godwin–Shelley story."²⁰ Holmes makes his undeviating biographical contribution to Fanny's destiny in a footnote also, going on to say that: "She inherited her mother's melancholic temperament, with none of her counterbalancing energy."²¹ I think one has to wonder about this claim and perhaps challenge it. It seems to be based on an account Godwin gave of his stepdaughter, in which he compared her in a generally unfavourable way with his daughter Mary as "somewhat given to indolence, which is her greatest fault". Mary Godwin, on the other hand, he described as "singularly bold, somewhat imperious, and active of mind".²² The problem is that all the accounts we have of Fanny, from that of Godwin onward, convey her as a kind of docile domestic, efficient at shopping, cooking and cleaning, and functioning as family peacemaker. But this was in a household where Godwin seems to have demanded of her, as the eldest child, that she *perform* these functions so that he might get on with the important task of being an active man of letters. In effect, she was therefore *compelled* to carry out these tasks, rather than having a "natural disposition" to function in this way. Furthermore, all the accounts of Fanny as indolent domestic emerge after February 1806, when Godwin formally explained to the 11-year-old that he was not her biological father. So what kind of child had she been up to this point?

The evidence is very sketchy, but it suggests that she was a lively girl and full of promise. In a letter from Wollstonecraft to her sister Everina, at four months Fanny is described as a little girl “who is more like a boy – She is ready to fly away with spirits”, and although she “does not promise to be a beauty”, she “appears *wonderfully* intelligent”.²³ (But what mother *wouldn't* describe her baby so favourably, one might say.) When Wollstonecraft took Fanny away with her along with her maid Marguerite on the extraordinary business trip she agreed to undertake to Sweden as Imlay's agent in 1795, Fanny was certainly on lively form by Wollstonecraft's account, disturbing her mother throughout and imitating a mail horn.²⁴ By the spring of 1796, with two suicide attempts behind her in response to Imlay's rejection of her for a younger woman, Wollstonecraft had become philosophical enough to turn her attention to the philosopher Godwin, who found the advances irresistible. “It was friendship melting into love”, Godwin reported later. “I had never loved till now; or, at least, had never nourished a passion to the same growth, or met with an object so consummately worthy.”²⁵ When she fell pregnant, and persuaded a reluctant Godwin to consign her free-living and loving reputation to the past by marrying her, she began to enjoy a new-found happiness, and part of this happiness was helped along by young Fanny, whose sentiments and behaviour towards Godwin, whom she quickly came to regard as her father, frequently brought them together. In the many letters Mary wrote to Godwin from the summer of 1796 onward, Fanny is frequently mentioned as asking to see “Man”, as she calls him, or as talking about him. “Go this way Mama, me wants to see Man”, Mary writes in one letter;²⁶ and in another Wollstonecraft says the two-year-old “wishes to ask Man's pardon – She won't cry any more.”²⁷ On his part, we now find Godwin occasionally signing his letters to Mary, “Man”. According to Rosalie Glynn Grylls, at three Fanny was a “bright young thing, with robust health that did credit to her mother's attitude that she should be inured to the climate by wearing a thin dress all the year round”, while Amelia Alderson, an admirer of both Godwin and Wollstonecraft, commented in a letter to the latter on Fanny's “strong, well-formed limbs and florid complexion”.²⁸ Unfortunately, no portrait of Fanny has ever been discovered—adding to the mystery of her persona, of course—but there is a tantalizing reference to her portrait being painted in a letter Godwin's close friend Charles Lamb wrote to William Hazlitt (dated 11 November 1805), where Lamb states that:

Miss Dawe is about a portrait of sulky Fanny Imlay alias Godwin: but Miss Dawe is of opinion that her subject is neither **reserved** nor sullen, and

doubtless she will **persuade** the picture to be of the same opinion. However, the features are tolerably like.²⁹

Hazlitt had evidently been enquiring of Lamb of the extent to which her first offspring resembled the character and looks of Mary Wollstonecraft. As yet I have been unable to trace this picture, which could be a miniature, since Elizabeth Dawe flourished as a miniaturist in the period 1800–05. The important point conveyed by Lamb's comment is that in November 1805, when Fanny was 11, she clearly possessed a vitality of disposition that is missing from the conventional descriptions.

I will return to this important period of Fanny's eleventh year in a moment. There is additional evidence of Fanny's vitality as a younger child, and it comes from an interesting ideologically weighted source. When Mary Wollstonecraft died 10 days after giving birth to the future Mary Shelley, public comments on the feminist legacy she had left behind in the deepening conservative political climate were far from complimentary, even before Godwin published the overly candid *Memoirs* that practically destroyed her reputation. A month after her death in September 1797 a journal called *The Monthly Visitor* felt that young Fanny had been so lively and boisterous that, as Don Locke puts it, she was a "warning to anyone who might be tempted by the ingenious theories of Mary Wollstonecraft [whose] philosophy was not the most happy, especially for a female. Miss Imlay has been spoilt by it." "This girl", the journal cautioned, "is a sufficient antidote to the mistaken speculations of her mother."³⁰

Written at a time of deep political reaction, such comments seem to be expressive of the prevailing hostility to all forms of "New Philosophy" alive in the period, and could simply be based on pure prejudice. But it does again link Fanny's personality with a vitality that is missing in later accounts. Certainly we know that when Wollstonecraft died, the "Man" little Fanny had already come to see as her father, William Godwin, "Without hesitation decided to adopt the three-year-old Fanny [...] and bring her up as his own", as William St Clair says.³¹ Louisa Jones, a friend of Godwin's sister Hannah, agreed to be housekeeper and foster-mother to Fanny and Mary at Godwin's Polygon residence in Somerstown, until she left to go and live with Godwin's friend Dyson at Bath in June 1800. Of her first mother substitute, St Clair comments: "Baby Mary grew to love her, but never Fanny."³² This would not be a surprising circumstance, given that the alert three-year-old had lost a mother like Mary Wollstonecraft. However, Fanny appears to have been happy enough under the care of her new mother, if the letter that Louisa Jones wrote to Godwin while he was away on a visit to Bristol shortly before Fanny's fourth birthday in the spring of 1798 is anything to go by. In her letter to a concerned Godwin, Louisa reports

that the girl's "animation exceeds any description I can attempt to offer you", and explains how "we have been most gloriously happy this morning, such a game of romps as would frighten you".³³

By 1801, when Godwin married Mrs Mary Clairmont, Fanny, who, as Mrs Marshall says, "bore Godwin's name" (Janet Todd says she was "relabelled 'Fanny Godwin'"³⁴), was being "considered and treated as the eldest daughter of the house".³⁵ Given the role expected of the eldest daughter in these times, I would suggest that the words "considered" and "treated" need especially close attention, in view of the case I am trying to establish here. It is invariably said by commentators on Godwin's unusual family grouping that he always treated Fanny well and with respect, as Marshall says, being "unvaryingly kind and indulgent" to her.³⁶ Undoubtedly so—in one sense. But the domestic role that was now thrust on Fanny as eldest daughter also clearly *domesticated* her in ways that were finally to prove intolerable. Don Locke believes that

somewhere along the line that playful little girl had been turned into a quiet, serious, somewhat repressed teenager:

The loss of a father before she was two, the loss of a mother when only three, separation from one substitute [mother] at the age of six, the acquisition of another, formidable and unsympathetic when she was seven, all left their mark.³⁷

It is very likely. Yet, as I am also suggesting, there were even more influential factors at work shaping Fanny's character than these disturbing shifts of parental figure.

In Fanny's tenth and eleventh years, two events occurred which may have been decisive for her developing sense of self, and for her eventual destiny. In March 1805 Mary Wollstonecraft's sisters aunt Everina and aunt Eliza, who ran a school in Dublin, wanted to send Fanny to a boarding school, but Godwin would in no way countenance this, preferring to educate her himself. By the time she had reached 21 in 1815, Fanny would have had as compendious an education as one might expect for a child reared in the intellectually rigorous pedagogical Godwinian orbit. But when in that year Godwin felt he might not have long to live, and wished to see 21-year-old Fanny settled in a career as a teacher, he was shocked when the aunts refused to take their niece on at the Dublin school. According to St Clair, they knew that Godwin and his wife Jane still hoped Fanny's half-sister Claire (previously Jane, since self-relabelled) could be persuaded to return to the Skinner Street household in Holborn from the ménage in which she was scandalously living abroad, with the eloped and estranged couple Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin. They were afraid that if Claire did return, Fanny would be morally tainted by the contact, and had no wish to endure the kind of

damaged reputations (and reduced incomes) they had suffered 16 years before when Godwin published his revelations about Fanny's mother in the more than candid *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft.³⁸ Fanny's one escape route to independence was thus blocked.

The other event that may have been decisive was when Godwin explained her true origins to 11-year-old Fanny in February 1806. Fanny was now able to learn much about herself and her past by reading her mother's letters and Godwin's *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft. One can only wonder what the effect of making these discoveries might have been. She would read her mother's description of her as the "barrier child", for instance³⁹, perhaps an appropriate term in many ways for a being conceived on the borders of a revolution, and who as an adult was never made to feel she belonged, "barred" from making any real advance in life by her displaced status. Certainly from now on Fanny was "increasingly conscious that unlike the other four children who had at least one natural parent in the family, Papa was not her father and Mamma was not her mother".⁴⁰ Or, one wonders what Fanny's reaction would have been to Wollstonecraft's ghostly communication from the past when she read in one of her mother's last letters to Imlay:

My child may have to blush for her mother's want to [sic] prudence — and may lament that the rectitude of my heart made me above vulgar precautions. But she shall not despise me for meanness. — You are now perfectly free. — God bless you!⁴¹

The vulgar precaution Wollstonecraft disdains was not birth control, but rather, as St Clair notes, it was the decision not to "bind Imlay to her in a financial marriage contract".⁴² In this curious process of discovering oneself in the body of a text, one cannot help thinking here of the way Mary Shelley has Frankenstein's Creature find out about what he calls his "accursed origin" by reading the journal his Creator had kept over "the four months that preceded my creation".⁴³

3

And it is from the grave, too, as it were, that Wollstonecraft blushing signals for us *the* factor which would prove the heaviest cross for Fanny to bear, living as she did in a household plagued by money worries. From everything one learns about the older Fanny, it is no surprise to learn, as Anne K. Mellor has noted, that "Fanny alone among his children emerges in Godwin's diary as a person whose opinions merit recording. On May 3, 1812, he records a conversation with Fanny 'on justice'."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, post-1806 Fanny's

primary function in the Godwin home seems to have been as undermanager of the domestic economy. “As the member of the family who did the shopping and negotiated credit with tradesmen, it was difficult for Fanny to maintain a philosophical detachment”, comments William St Clair.⁴⁵ Indeed, the maintenance of such detachment was Godwin’s special province. It became more and more Fanny’s function in life to see that Godwin’s capacity to maintain philosophical detachment be protected, that he should be serviced, as it were, to this end. Without the periods of quiet he required for writing the steady stream of books needed to keep the Juvenile Library going, as well as continuing to produce his groundbreaking novels, the family would starve.

But despite all efforts, many were the financial crises that Godwin suffered over the years following the founding of the bookshop and publishing businesses. Although the turnover of the books of M.J. Godwin and Co.⁴⁶ was high, and the works themselves were a great critical success, “from the beginning the bookshop was hopelessly under-capitalized”⁴⁷, and therefore always stumbling from one borrowing crisis to the next. Of course, Godwin was not unique in enduring such pressures, for many of his friends also suffered acute financial problems, some worse than himself. As St Clair reports, in 1806 alone Godwin bailed his old friend the scientist William Nicholson “no less than fifteen times with money unlikely ever to be repaid”.⁴⁸ Those content to repeat the “venerable horseleech” tag that Leslie Stephen was content to attach to Godwin should take pause here, and note how important a *cultural* factor the difficulties of financial solvency could be for *many* family and individual lives in the rapidly changing economic circumstances of this volatile and precarious transitional epoch.

The period from 1809 to 1810 was particularly catastrophic in the Godwin household, but it was after the elopement and return of Percy Shelley, Mary Godwin and Claire Clairmont in 1814–15 that Fanny’s role as the go-between helping negotiate Godwin’s loans from Percy Shelley began its long and one-way downward spiral. This was the time that Dowden calls “Poverty in London”, a fitting epitaph for Fanny’s grave, if ever anyone had cared enough about her to have provided one. It is the phase in which a “half-surreptitious communication was kept up” with Godwin’s household through Charles Clairmont and Fanny, “whose affections”, says Dowden, “were with Shelley and Mary, but whose sense of duty to Godwin restrained her from entering into direct relations with those who had offended him so deeply”.⁴⁹ Her affections did remain with Percy and Mary, as is shown by her long letters to Mary when she was in Switzerland in the summer of 1816, and by those she wrote to her when Mary, Percy and Claire returned to live in Bath that autumn. As is clear from the letters, Fanny had been suffering deep depressions all spring and summer, and it seems only too likely that these

were occasioned by her lack of prospects and hopeless entanglement in the gloom of Godwin's demanding financial problems. At the end of July, she had written to Mary:

I plead guilty to the charge of having written in some degree in an ill humour; but if you knew how I am harassed by a variety of trying circumstances I am sure you would feel for me [...]

[I] should have answered [Jane's letter] but for the dreadful state of mind I generally labour under & which I in vain endeavour to get rid of.⁵⁰

Yet she is also able to comment with acuteness and compassion on the post-war political and social crises afflicting England:

You ask for the particulars of the state of England – I do not understand the causes for this distress, which I see, and hear dreadful accounts of every day; but I know that they really exist – papa I believe does not think much, or does not enquire on these subjects, for I never can get him to give me any information – From Mr Booth I get the clearest account; which has been confirmed by others since. He says that it is the peace that has brought all this calamity upon us; that during the war the whole continent was employed in fighting and defending their country from the incursions of foreign armies, that England alone was free to manufactory in peace that our manufactories in consequence employed several millions, & at higher wages than were wanted for our own consumption, now peace is come foreign ports are shut – and millions of our fellow countrymen left to starve.⁵¹

This widespread distress was obviously felt deeply by Fanny, and she was determined to let Mary know in some detail what was happening in her native England:

They say that in the countries of Staffordshire and Shropshire there are 26 thousand men out of employment – and without the means of getting any – a few weeks since there were several parties of Colliers who came as far as St Albans, and Oxford, dragging coals – in immense wagons without horses to the prince Regent at Carlton house, one of these wagons was said to be conducted by an hundred Colliers; the Ministers however thought proper when these men had got to the distance from London of St Albans to send magistrates to them – who paid them handsomely for these coals – & gave them money besides – telling them that coming to London would only create disturbance & riot without relieving their misery – they therefore turned back.⁵²

Direct actions by the unemployed as a response to deprivation were by no means contained so easily in other parts of the country—and it is in reporting such riotous outbreaks that Fanny’s critical and observational capacities become noticeably astute and pointed:

[. . .] there have been riots of a very serious nature in the inland counties arising from the same causes – this joined to this melancholy season have given us all very serious alarm – and helped to make me to write so dismally – they talk of a change of ministers – but this can effect no good; it is a change of the whole system of things that is wanted, – Mr Owen⁵³ however tells us to cheer up, for that in two years we shall feel the good effects of his plans – he is quite certain they will succeed – I have no doubt he will do a great deal of good, but how he can expect to make the rich give up their possessions, and live in a state of equality, is too romantic to be believed [. . .]

[. . .] I own I should not like to live to see the extinction of all genius, talent, and elevated generous feeling in great Britain, which I conceive to be the natural consequence of Mr Owens plan.⁵⁴

Robert Owen’s paternalistic plans for reform based on social engineering did ultimately fail, as all “top-down solutions” to problems of social and economic inequity are inclined to do, often denying individual *agency* to those whose condition is supposedly being “ameliorated”. If other elements of Fanny’s character may not have helped her to be a survivor of the intractable social circumstances in which she found herself, the combination of indignation and insight expressed here is surely evidence that this is a young woman whose instincts about the world and the people around her are truly sound and dignified—prescient even.

I began by broaching the question of how many people have been and are imposed upon, denied a legitimate name or voice by the controllers of the naming and legitimacy processes. In seeking a way towards shaping an answer to the enigmatic question “Just who *was* Fanny?” I would want to cite Hazlitt’s 1818 political essay “What is the People?”⁵⁵ and link it to the trajectory of Fanny’s life. In his essay, published the same year that *Frankenstein* first appeared, Hazlitt’s essential concern is to explore how on earth the rigid and reactionary English political hegemony will be able to come to terms with the newly emerging working-class structure. This growing collectivity of social forces has yet, of course, to be codified by name. Yet it unquestionably exists, and for the suspect managers of “Legitimacy” whom Hazlitt repeatedly interrogates and exposes, it is a presence that will become increasingly troublesome, one which the ruling powers should have the sense to respect—and perhaps even fear.

No one ever expressed any fear of Fanny Godwin. Yet, given her displaced status, her disputed name, the pressures of poverty that were beyond her powers to resolve, and her abandonment to an unknown pauper's grave by those more concerned with reputation than respect, it would not be extravagant to suggest that Fanny Godwin was a person who in many ways may be thought of as a potent embodiment of "the People".

Notes

- 1 This essay is based upon a paper originally delivered at the Romantic Generations conference of the British Association of Romantic Studies (BARS), University of Leeds, July 1997.
- 2 See Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 2003) 10. All further references to the novel relate to this edition.
- 3 See Betty T. Bennett, ed., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, vol. 1 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 91.
- 4 Shelley 8.
- 5 See Janet Todd, "Thoughts on the Death of Fanny Wollstonecraft," *Gender, Art and Death*, by Janet Todd (Oxford: Polity, 1993) 120. She was named Fanny (formerly Frances) after her mother's best friend Fanny Blood.
- 6 Shelley 225.
- 7 Reproduced in Marion Kingston Stocking, ed., *The Clairmont Correspondence: Letters of Claire Clairmont, Charles Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay Godwin*, vol. 1 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 86. The full *Cambrian* report on Fanny's death, including the text of Fanny's suicide note, is reproduced on p. 87.
- 8 William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (London: Faber, 1989) 411.
- 9 For Saturday, 12 October, Mary Shelley's journal records the following: "He return[s] with the worst account – a miserable day – two letters from Papa – buy mourning & work in the evening." See Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, eds., *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 141.
- 10 In passing, it is surely worth remarking on the fact that Fanny was found wearing the 20-year-old stays of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft. Although it is extraordinary to reflect that Godwin had kept his dead wife's corsets until such time as Fanny might be able to wear them, given the reverence and respect accorded to Wollstonecraft's memory both by Godwin and by her first daughter, it is not surprising to find Fanny desiring to maintain a kind of physical intimacy with her dead mother in this rather unconventional way.

- 11 At my request, a search by the principal archivist of West Glamorgan Archive Service was made in May 2004 of the parish burial register for 1816 of St John-juxta-Swansea, as well as the indexes for the parishes of Swansea St Mary, Llangyfelach and Llansamlet. The International Genealogical Index was also searched, but no entry could be traced for Frances/Fanny Godwin/Imlay/Wollstonecraft in any of these historical sources. The opinion of the archivist Kim Collis was that “it is most likely that she was buried in an unmarked grave because she committed suicide” (personal communication, 7 May 2004).
- 12 Qtd in St Clair 412.
- 13 Gordon Brotherston, “The Republican Calendar: A Diagnostic of the French Revolution,” *1789 Reading, Writing Revolution: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1981*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Essex: U of Essex, 1982) 9.
- 14 William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Book X, 1.696, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- 15 Wordsworth, 11.692–3.
- 16 Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 156.
- 17 Letter to William Roscoe, 12 Nov. 1792. See Janet Todd, ed., *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Allen Lane, 2003) 208.
- 18 On 20 September 1792 the French Legislative Assembly had made divorce legally available to women.
- 19 Tomalin 185.
- 20 Richard Holmes, ed., *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark & Memoirs of the Author of The Rights of Woman*, by Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 304, n. 61.
- 21 Holmes 304, n. 61.
- 22 The Godwin letter from which these quotations come is printed in Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley* (London: Constable, 1988) 15.
- 23 Letter to Everina Wollstonecraft, 20 Sept. 1794. See Todd, *Collected Letters* 262.
- 24 Letter to Imlay, 10 June 1795. See Todd, *Collected Letters* 296.
- 25 Mary Wollstonecraft & William Godwin, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, *Memoirs of the Author of The Rights of Woman*, ed. Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 258.
- 26 Letter from Mary to Godwin, 10 Sept. 1796. See Ralph M. Wardle, ed., *Godwin & Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft* (Lawrence and London: U of Kansas P, 1967) 30.
- 27 Letter from Mary to Godwin, 26 Oct. 1796. See Wardle 44.
- 28 Rosalie Glynn Grylls, *William Godwin and his World* (London: Odham’s Press, 1953) 126.
- 29 Edwin W. Marris, Jr., ed., *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, vol. 2 (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1976) 188. Italicized and emboldened

- fonts are used by Marrs to indicate the emphases applied by Lamb in certain of his epistolary locutions.
- 30 See Don Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) 217.
- 31 St Clair 180.
- 32 St Clair 180.
- 33 Louisa Jones to William Godwin, 9 Mar. 1798. Bodleian Library, Shelley-Godwin MSS, Dep. c.508.
- 34 Todd, "Thoughts on the Death of Fanny Wollstonecraft" 123.
- 35 Mrs Julian Marshall, *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1889) 15–16.
- 36 Marshall 13.
- 37 Locke 217.
- 38 St Clair 399.
- 39 In his *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft, Godwin explained that Fanny had been described in this way because she was conceived at the toll gate barrier between Paris and Neuilly. See St Clair 182.
- 40 St Clair 296.
- 41 Letter to Imlay, c. Oct. 1795. See Todd, *Collected Letters* 330.
- 42 St Clair 500, app. I.
- 43 Shelley 132.
- 44 Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) 14.
- 45 St Clair 296.
- 46 The business was formally named after Godwin's wife Mary Jane Godwin. Godwin himself was still perceived in this wartime period as a potentially dangerous radical political writer, so wrote all of his educational works for children under pseudonyms in an attempt to avoid the authorities proscribing these publications, a move which actually succeeded, since he was never prosecuted.
- 47 St Clair 287.
- 48 St Clair 290.
- 49 Edward Dowden, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, 1886) 462.
- 50 Stocking 54.
- 51 Stocking 54–55. David Booth (1776–1846) had married Mary Godwin's friend Isabel Baxter in 1814.
- 52 Stocking 55.
- 53 Robert Owen (1771–1858), Welsh social and educational reformer, and founder of New Lanark model manufacturing village, formed into a company along with Jeremy Bentham and others in 1813. In some ways his *New View of Society* (1813) shows the influence of Godwin's ideas in *Political Justice* (1793), since he argues that character is formed by social circumstances.

- 54 Stocking 55.
- 55 William Hazlitt, "What is the People?" *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt. Vol. 4: Political Essays*, ed. Duncan Wu (7 and 14 March 1818; London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998) 241–60.

Maurice Hindle, Among Maurice Hindle's publications are editions of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2003), William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (2005) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (2003) for Penguin Classics, a book-length study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in *Penguin Critical Studies* (1994), and editions of Godwin's last two novels *Cloudesley* (1830) and *Deloraine* (1833) for Pickering and Chatto's *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin* (1992). His latest book is for Palgrave Macmillan, *Studying Shakespeare on Film* (2006). Address: Faculty of Arts, The Open University in London, 1–11 Hawley Crescent, Camden Town, London NW1 8NP, UK. [email: m.r.hindle@open.ac.uk]