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Mary and Mary, quite contrary

Book of the week

One Mary wrote a pioneering feminist tract; the other wrote *Frankenstein* — many people don't realise they were mother and daughter, says David Aaronovitch



Romantic
Outlaws: the
Extraordinary
Lives of Mary
Wollstonecraft &
Mary Shelley

by Charlotte Gordon

Hutchinson, 649pp, £25 + £20

Mary Godwin who became the novelist Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797. A week and a half later one of the modern era's greatest Britons, the political philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, died, probably of septicaemia. To this day, so separate are their reputations, many educated people do not know that one was the daughter and the other was the mother.

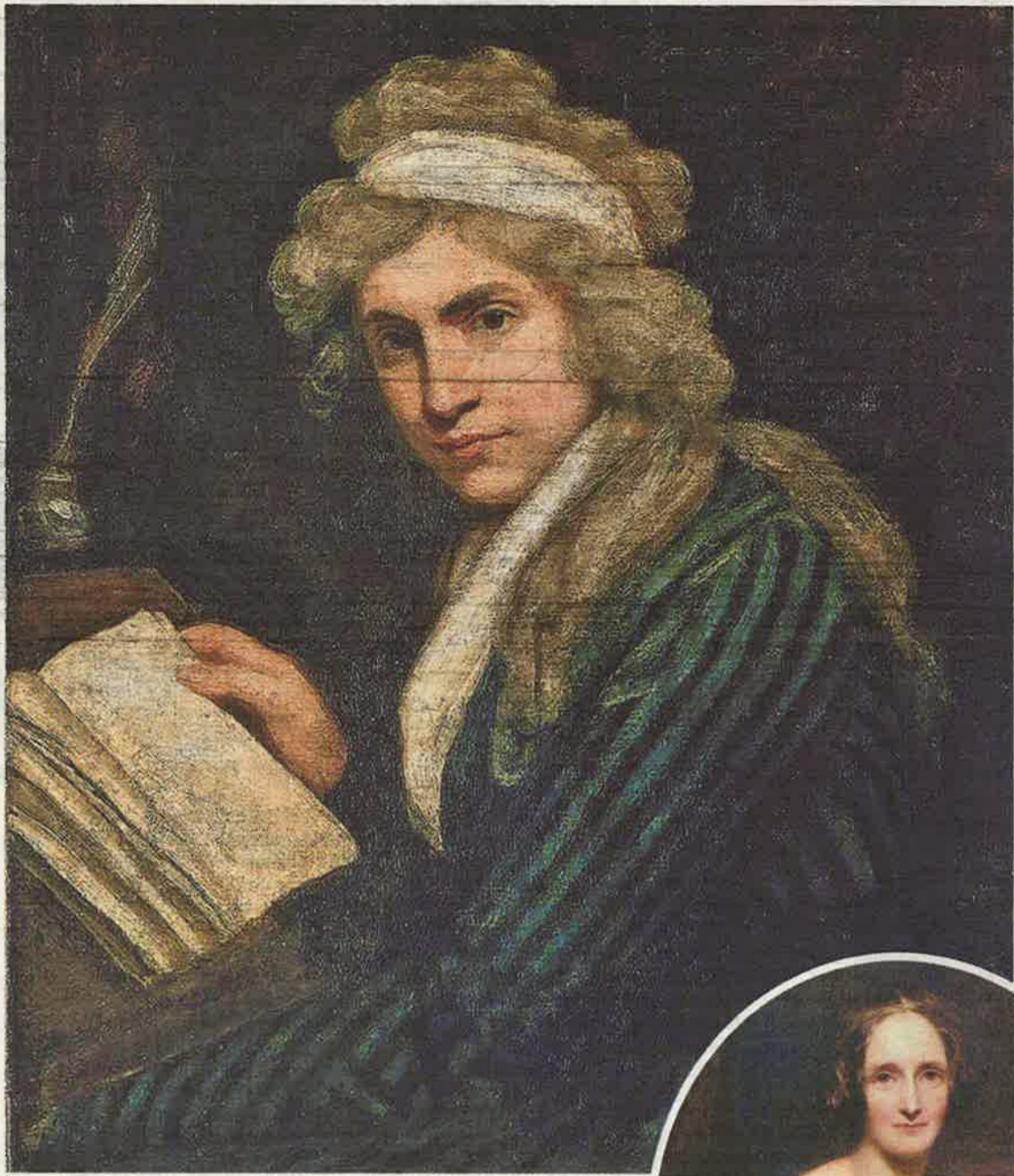
Charlotte Gordon, author of this unique double biography argues that such ignorance may partly be because many scholars have seen the two as "unrelated figures representing different philosophical stances and literary movements". Consequently, says Gordon, "Shelley appears in the epilogues of biographies of Wollstonecraft and Wollstonecraft in the introductory pages of the lives of Shelley." Their intellectual and emotional relationship to one another is thus mislaid.

Gordon seeks to remedy this by interleaving the two lives, episode by episode. So in one chapter, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft is publishing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in London in 1792 and Mary Shelley is writing the first pages of *Frankenstein* in Geneva in 1816 in the next. It is a technique made slightly perilous by the two women being namesakes and so many of the people in both their lives being called Fanny or William.

But nevertheless it works. It makes it possible, for example, to find Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary S's husband, writing in *The Revolt of Islam* the lines "Can man be free if woman be a slave?" in proximity to Wollstonecraft's outlining of just that philosophy.

However, if it reminds the reader of the debt owed to the pioneer feminist, it also acts as a reminder that the two women's lives and outlooks were, in fact, very different. More different, perhaps, than Gordon herself wishes always to acknowledge. Both had genius. Both saw women as the equals of men in ages when such a perception was hugely radical.

But their personal successes and trage-



WOMEN OF CONSEQUENCE Mary Wollstonecraft, above, and Mary Shelley

dies were very different. Mary W had a bad, violent father and a weak mother and inherited nothing that helped her. Falling far from the tree she taught herself, earned both for herself and her sisters, took one sister out of an abusive marriage and lived entirely independently for most of her life.

Both saw women as the equals of men in ages when such a view was hugely radical

Mary S was born into an intellectual household, where — as a child — she heard Coleridge reading aloud from *The Ancient Mariner*. Aaron Burr, the American revolutionary, visited and praised her writing. She had a father — the political philosopher William Godwin — who loved her, who had adored her now absent but hugely famous mother and who believed of his daughter that she had "considerable talent". Mary Shelley's third most critical relationship, other than with Percy Bysshe Shelley and her father, was her extraordinary rivalry and friendship

with her stepsister Jane (later Claire), who was to bear one of Byron's several illegitimate children.

Just as different were the eras into which the women emerged and the way in which they engaged with them. Mary W was an active political radical for most of her life. She supported American independence and the French Revolution, dined with Thomas Paine and her main books — her republican *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and feminist *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* — sold in their thousands.

People who met her were transformed by her. In their last days in Italy before Percy Shelley's drowning off Livorno, he and Mary S had met the remarkable Mary King, who as a child in an aristocratic Anglo-Irish household had had Mary W as a governess. King had gone on to have eight children, abandon her husband, travel to Germany and there train as a doctor while dressing as a man. All this she put down to Wollstonecraft who had "freed her mind from all superstitions".

Wollstonecraft's radical prescience can

be gauged by the fact that it took 126 years after *A Vindication* for women to gain the vote in Britain, even longer to create equal laws for the sexes — and the task of true equality is not completed yet.

Nor is her political work. Gordon establishes that, in addition to *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft's 1794 book, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, written in Le Havre, deserves attention for the clarity of its exposition of the need for equality more generally. The American "Founding Father" John Adams read the book the year before he became the second president of the United States and wrote more than 10,000 words in the margins of his copy.

The mother, then, was a political optimist who believed in and argued for progress. Her daughter was no such thing. Mary S's politics were private. Consumerist, almost. Mary S and her husband boycotted sugar because it was produced on slave plantations, but otherwise were not engaged, spending most of their time abroad. By the time she was in her late teens revolution had dissolved into terror and terror into war. Hers was not the world of Paine and Danton but of Metternich and George Stephenson, of *Rocket* fame. Mary Shelley had, according to Gordon, "deep reservations about the ability of human beings to improve themselves or the world". Her greatest work — *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* — is a work of profoundest pessimism.

If Mary W was, in essence a social democrat and Mary S a Green, their emotional desires and experiences were also very distinct. Mary W had her first child in her mid-thirties, and eventually settled down (for one last, short year) with a man who was steady. Mary S was a mother at 18 and eloped with a man who was volatile.

But then, when it comes down to it, what role did either play in the other's life? Mary Shelley had no influence on her mother other than being the innocent occasion of her death, thanks to complications during childbirth. Her older half-sister Fanny, illegitimate daughter of an American merchant, Gilbert Imlay, could lay more claim to have been a presence in her mother's life. And to have been affected by it. In 1794 — the year Fanny was born — Wollstonecraft attempted suicide by laudanum overdose and failed. In 1816, 22 years later, Fanny attempted suicide by laudanum overdose and succeeded. Yet it was of Fanny that Mary Wollstonecraft had written that "My little Girl begins to suck so manfully that her father reckons saucily on her writing the second part of the *Rights of Woman*."

This thought — about the tragedy of the unfamous — was one of many occasioned in me by an excellent and poignant book whose heroines breathe in its pages. I recommend it.



Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a work of profoundest pessimism

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