

STUDY OF A FAMOUS POET: PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation traces the emergence of a new discourse on nonviolence conflict reconciliation during the age of the English Romantic poets. Specifically, this project examines Percy Bysshe Shelley's prose works such as *An Address to the Irish People*, *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists*, and the *Notes to Queen Mab*. Within these texts Shelley articulates both the philosophy and methodology of nonviolent conflict reconciliation. His theory significantly impacted the formation of the philosophies and the campaigns of the later nonviolence author/activists Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mairead Maguire. Rather than viewing their momentous campaigns as separate, disconnected events, my goal is to establish nonviolence as a discourse that begins with Shelley's Irish writings. Shelley's recommendations for nonviolent resistance are expressed in Thoreau's work as "civil disobedience," in Gandhi's writings as "satyagraha," and in the contemporary works of King and Maguire as "nonviolence reconciliation." In the writings of these activists there is a commonality of language that can be traced back to Shelley. This nonviolence discourse is reflective of and advocates selfless, compassionate love in the same degree for the enemy as for the friend. Strategies of exclusively nonviolent protest and action are utilized to accomplish the goal. The campaigns of these practitioners remain wholly consistent with Shelley's recommendations. Percy Bysshe Shelley (4 August 1792 – 8 July 1822) was one of the major English Romantic poets and is critically regarded as among the finest lyric poets in the English language. A radical in his poetry as well as his political and social views, Shelley did not achieve fame during his lifetime, but recognition for his poetry grew steadily following his death. Shelley was a key member of a close circle of visionary poets and writers that included Lord Byron; Leigh Hunt; Thomas Love Peacock; and his own second wife, Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*. Shelley is perhaps best known for such classic poems as *Ozymandias*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *To a Skylark*, *Music*, *When Soft Voices Die*, *The Cloud* and *The Masque of Anarchy*. His other major works include long, visionary poems such as *Queen Mab* (later reworked as *The Daemon of the World*), *Alastor*, *The Revolt of Islam*, *Adonais*, the unfinished work *The Triumph of Life*; and the visionary verse dramas *The Cenci* (1819) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). His close circle of admirers, however, included some progressive thinkers of the day, including his future father-in-law, the philosopher William Godwin. Though Shelley's poetry and prose output remained steady throughout his life, most publishers and journals declined to publish his work for fear of being arrested themselves for blasphemy or sedition.

Shelley did not live to see success and influence, although these reach down to the present day not only in literature, but in major movements in social and political thought. Shelley became an idol of the next three or four generations of poets, including important Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite poets such as Robert Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He was admired by Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, W. B. Yeats, Karl Marx, Upton Sinclair and Isadora Duncan. Henry David Thoreau's civil disobedience was apparently influenced by Shelley's non-violence in protest and political action.

Mary Shelley was born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin in Somers Town, London, in 1797. She was the second child of the feminist philosopher, educator, and writer Mary Wollstonecraft, and the first child of the philosopher, novelist, and journalist William Godwin. Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever ten days after Mary was born. Godwin was left to bring up Mary, along with her older half-sister, Fanny Imlay, Wollstonecraft's child by the American speculator Gilbert Imlay. A year after Wollstonecraft's death, Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), which he intended as a sincere and compassionate tribute. However, because the *Memoirs* revealed Wollstonecraft's affairs and her illegitimate child, they were seen as shocking. Mary Godwin read these memoirs and her mother's books, and was brought up to cherish her mother's memory. Mary's earliest years were happy ones, judging from the letters of William Godwin's housekeeper and nurse, Louisa Jones.^[4] But Godwin was often deeply in debt; feeling that he could not raise the children by himself, he cast about for a second wife. In December 1801, he married Mary Jane Clairmont, a well-educated woman with two young children of her own—Charles and Claire. Most of Godwin's friends disliked his new wife, describing her as quick-tempered and quarrelsome; but Godwin was devoted to her, and the marriage was a success. Mary Godwin, on the other hand, came to detest her stepmother. William Godwin's 19th-century biographer C. Kegan Paul later suggested that Mrs Godwin had favoured her own children over Mary Wollstonecraft's. Together, the Godwins started a publishing firm called M. J. Godwin, which sold children's books as well as stationery, maps, and games. However, the business did not turn a profit, and Godwin was forced to borrow substantial sums to keep it going. He continued to borrow to pay off earlier loans, compounding his problems. By 1809, Godwin's business was close to failure and he was "near to despair. Godwin was saved from debtor's prison by philosophical devotees such as Francis Place, who lent him further money. Though Mary Godwin received little formal education, her father tutored her in a broad range of subjects. He often took the children on educational outings, and they had access to his library and to the many intellectuals who visited him, including the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the former vice-president of the United States Aaron Burr.¹ Godwin admitted he was not educating the children according to Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy as outlined in works such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), but Mary Godwin nonetheless received an unusual and advanced education for a girl of the time. She had a governess, a daily tutor, and read many of her father's children's books on Roman and Greek history in manuscript. For six months in 1811, she also attended a boarding school in Ramsgate.¹

Her father described her at fifteen as "singularly bold, somewhat imperious, and active of mind. Her desire of knowledge is great, and her perseverance in everything she undertakes almost invincible. In June 1812, her father sent Mary to stay with the Dissenting family of the radical William Baxter, near Dundee, Scotland. To Baxter, he wrote, "I am anxious that she should be brought up ... like a philosopher, even like a cynic. Scholars have speculated that she may have been sent away for her health, to remove her from the seamy side of business, or to introduce her to radical politics. Mary Godwin revelled in the spacious surroundings of Baxter's house and in the companionship of his four daughters, and she returned north in the summer of 1813 for a further stay of ten months.

Mary Godwin may have first met the radical poet-philosopher Percy Bysshe Shelley in the interval between her two stays in Scotland. By the time she returned home for a second time on 30 March 1814, Percy Shelley had become estranged from his wife and was regularly visiting Godwin, whom he had agreed to bail out of debt. Percy Shelley's radicalism, particularly his economic views, which he had imbibed from Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793), had alienated him from his wealthy aristocratic family: they wanted him to follow traditional models of the landed aristocracy, and he wanted to donate large amounts of the family's money to schemes intended to help the disadvantaged. Percy Shelley therefore had difficulty gaining access to money until he inherited his estate because his family did not want him wasting it on projects of "political justice". After several months of promises, Shelley announced that he either could not or would not pay off all of Godwin's debts. Godwin was angry and felt betrayed. Mary and Percy began meeting each other secretly at Mary Wollstonecraft's grave in St Pancras Churchyard, and they fell in love—she was nearly seventeen, he nearly twenty-two. To Mary's dismay, her father disapproved and tried to thwart the relationship and salvage the "spotless fame" of his daughter. At about the same time, Mary's father learned of Shelley's inability to pay off the father's debts. Mary, who later wrote of "my excessive and romantic attachment to my father", was confused. She saw Percy Shelley as an embodiment of her parents' liberal and reformist ideas of the 1790s, particularly Godwin's view that marriage was a repressive monopoly, which he had argued in his 1793 edition of *Political Justice* but since retracted. On 28 July 1814, the couple secretly left for France, taking Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, with them,^[30] but leaving Percy's pregnant wife behind. After convincing Mary Jane Godwin, who had pursued them to Calais, that they did not wish to return, the trio travelled to Paris, and then, by donkey, mule, carriage, and foot, through a France recently ravaged by war, to Switzerland. "It was acting in a novel, being an incarnate romance," Mary Shelley recalled in 1826.^[31] As they travelled, Mary and Percy read works by Mary Wollstonecraft and others, kept a joint journal, and continued their own writing. At Lucerne, lack of money forced the three to turn back. They travelled down the Rhine and by land to the Dutch port of Marsluys, arriving at Gravesend, Kent, on 13 September 1814

Mary Shelley lived a literary life. Her father encouraged her to learn to write by composing letters, and her favourite occupation as a child was writing stories. Unfortunately, all of Mary's

juvenilia were lost when she ran off with Percy in 1814, and none of her surviving manuscripts can be definitively dated before that year. Her first published work is often thought to have been comic verses written for Godwin's Juvenile Library when she was ten and a half; however, the poem is attributed to another writer in the most recent authoritative collection of her works. Percy Shelley enthusiastically encouraged Mary Shelley's writing: "My husband was, from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame. He was forever inciting me to obtain literary reputation. Certain sections of Mary Shelley's novels are often interpreted as masked rewritings of her life. Critics have pointed to the recurrence of the father-daughter motif in particular as evidence of this autobiographical style. For example, commentators frequently read *Mathilda* (1820) autobiographically, identifying the three central characters as versions of Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and Percy Shelley. Mary Shelley herself confided that she modelled the central characters of *The Last Man* on her Italian circle. Mary Shelley employed the techniques of many different novelistic genres, most vividly the Godwinian novel, Walter Scott's new historical novel, and the Gothic novel. The Godwinian novel, made popular during the 1790s with works such as Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), "employed a Rousseauvian confessional form to explore the contradictory relations between the self and society", and *Frankenstein* exhibits many of the same themes and literary devices as Godwin's novel. However, Shelley critiques those Enlightenment ideals that Godwin promotes in his works. In *The Last Man*, she uses the philosophical form of the Godwinian novel to demonstrate the ultimate meaninglessness of the world. While earlier Godwinian novels had shown how rational individuals could slowly improve society, *The Last Man* and *Frankenstein* demonstrate the individual's lack of control over history.

In her own lifetime, Mary Shelley was taken seriously as a writer, though reviewers often missed her writings' political edge. After her death, however, she was chiefly remembered as the wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley and as the author of *Frankenstein*. In fact, in the introduction to her letters published in 1945, editor Frederick Jones wrote, "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 [Percy Bysshe Shelley] that she excites our interest." This attitude had not disappeared by 1980 when Betty T. Bennett published the first volume of Mary Shelley's complete letters. As she explains, "the fact is that until recent years scholars have generally regarded Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley as a result: William Godwin's and Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter who became Shelley's Pygmalion." It was not until Emily Sunstein's *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* in 1989 that a full-length scholarly biography was published. The attempts of Mary Shelley's son and daughter-in-law to "Victorianise" her memory by censoring biographical documents contributed to a perception of Mary Shelley as a more conventional, less reformist figure than her works suggest. Her own timid omissions from Percy Shelley's works and her quiet avoidance of public controversy in her later years added to this impression. Commentary by Hogg, Trelawny, and other admirers of Percy Shelley also tended to downplay Mary Shelley's radicalism. Trelawny's *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* (1878) praised

Percy Shelley at the expense of Mary, questioning her intelligence and even her authorship of *Frankenstein*. Lady Shelley, Percy Florence's wife, responded in part by presenting a severely edited collection of letters she had inherited, published privately as *Shelley and Mary* in 1882.

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Bysshe is pronounced as if written *bish*.

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Bieri (2008), pp. 154–176.

Bieri (2008), p. 195.

Bieri (2008), p. 185.

Bieri (2008), pp. 188 and 189. For comparison, Jane Austen, in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, set during this period, describes Mr. Darcy's annual income as 10,000 £. See i Brad deLong's discussion of this in "How Rich is Mr. Darcy?"

"The Shelley 'fortune' promised fiscal relief for Godwin in accordance with the tenets of equitable distribution of wealth advocated in *Political Justice* and subscribed to by his new pupil" (Bieri [2008], p. 189).

(Bieri (2008), p. 256. "Responding to Shelly's willingness to compromise, the Duke brought father and son together at a large party. According to Hogg, the Earl of Oxford pointed to Timothy and asked a pleased Shelley, 'Pray, who is that very strange old man . . . who talks so much, so loudly, and in so extraordinary a manner, and all about himself.' Shelley identified his father and walked home with the Earl" (Bieri [2008], pp. 256–57).

Bieri (2008), p. 199.

An advertisement in the *Dublin Evening Post*, quoted in Bieri (2008), p. 200.