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Essay by John J. Miller

MONSTERS



HARRIET SHELLEY MUST HAVE FELT she was living through a personal horror story. In 1814, she was an 18-year-old mother, pregnant with her second child, when her husband—the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley—ran off with another woman. Perhaps she should have known better than to trust him. “Love is free,” wrote Percy in the notes to his poem *Queen Mab*, which he had dedicated to Harriet. “To promise for ever to love the same woman is not less absurd than to promise to believe the same creed.”

Percy’s new fancy was the 16-year-old Mary Godwin. Soon she was pregnant, too. While they were keeping house, Percy, then 21, hatched a plan: he wrote to his estranged wife and suggested a ménage-à-trois. This time, Harriet had the good sense to reject him. Eventually she gave birth to a son—Mary’s child was stillborn—and hoped that Percy would return to her and their two children. Before long, however, she recognized that her husband was gone for good. She slipped into depression; and in 1816, at the age of 21, she drowned herself in a lake in London’s Hyde Park. In a moment of despair, Harriet wrote about Percy in a letter to a friend: “The man I once loved is dead. This is a vampire.”

Villains and Victims

HARRIET’S BITING COMMENT ABOUT one of the great poets of the Romantic era came more than 80 years before Bram Stoker introduced the world to the

count from Transylvania. Yet the collapse of her marriage helped give birth to a pair of literature’s most iconic monsters, in the novels *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Lord Byron, who played a more direct role in their conception, once wrote, “truth is always strange; stranger than fiction.” This line from *Don Juan* is so good that it has entered the vernacular, passing what may be the most challenging test of poetic expression: it’s now a cliché. Yet it was once fresh and original, and it sums up the remarkable events surrounding the famous encounter between Byron and Shelley—an incident Andrew McConnell Stott calls “the most auspicious literary meeting” since William Wordsworth met Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The meeting of Byron and Shelley—it would grow into a friendship—was many things, but “auspicious,” with its suggestion of good fortune, is a stretch. Readers surely have profited from their confab. So have writers, who have told and retold of the events and circumstances surrounding it. The best account belongs to Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, whose 2006 book *The Monsters* is both comprehensive and riveting. Stott, a professor of English at the University at Buffalo, is the latest to take a stab at the story, in *The Poet and the Vampyre*, which focuses on Byron. Editors Susan J. Wolfson and Ronald Levaio tell a truncated version from the perspective of Mary Godwin, who in the wake of Harriet’s suicide became Mary Shelley, in their introduction to *The Annotated Frankenstein*. The tale of Byron and Shelley and their

circle has all the right ingredients for a Gothic thriller: ambition, rivalry, intrigue, sex, and death. They combined in an extraordinary episode of modern mythmaking—a tale of villains and victims, some of them imaginary but many of them real.

Mad, Bad, and Dangerous

IN 1815, ABOUT A YEAR AFTER PERCY ABANDONED Harriet, Mount Tambora, on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, spewed black rain and fire. It was the largest volcanic eruption in recorded history—bigger than the better-known blasts of Krakatoa, Pinatubo, and Vesuvius—and it went on for months, in conjunction with several lesser eruptions elsewhere. Tambora’s explosion was so mighty that it changed the global climate. In Europe, 1816 became known as “the year without a summer.” Clouds and ash shrouded the skies. Temperatures fell and crops failed. English tourists took advantage of the post-Napoleonic peace that year and vacationed on the continent. On the Lake Geneva shoreline in Switzerland, they huddled indoors to avoid the constant rain and cool weather. When they ventured out, one of their favorite pastimes was to peer through telescopes at a large house that sat across the water from the city of Geneva. This was the Villa Diodati, rented by George Gordon, the poet better known as Lord Byron. A discarded lover had labeled him “mad, bad, and dangerous to know”—possibly an apocryphal line, but one that stuck because it was so fitting.



Byron was a literary sensation. When he published the first part of his long poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, it sold out in hours. "I awoke one morning and found myself famous," he quipped. Yet he groomed his fame as well, through a mixture of physical achievement (he swam the Hellespont) and pure vanity (he wore hair curlers to bed). He also became one of history's great womanizers. As a student at Cambridge, he fathered a son with his maid. He later married Annabella Milbanke, the cousin of a woman with whom he had an adulterous affair. Their union produced a child—Ada, who became a mathematics prodigy—but fell apart after about a year, apparently because of Byron's sexual involvement with his half-sister, Augusta. As word of their incest spread, Byron's acclaim turned to notoriety. He became a scandal and fled England, never to return. He traveled with John Polidori, a handsome doctor with an agenda: Polidori dreamed of becoming a writer and believed that employment with Byron would advance his career.

If Byron were alive today, he would be a rock star with an entourage. Shelley would be a Greenpeace activist with a trust fund. Born to wealth, he turned to leftist politics and adopted unconventional habits. Militant atheism got him expelled from Oxford. He became a vegetarian. "Thin as a stripling and as pale as blue-veined marble, he had large, bulging eyes, long, wild, unmanaged curls and a high-pitched voice that would rise to an avian screech when he became agitated," writes Stott. "His clothes hung on his body as if they had been left to dry, and with his neck bare, his shirt undone, and refusing to wear anything made from wool or animal skin, he went about perpetually underdressed." Shelley was also a cheat—a serial betrayer in matters large and small. "Even revolutionaries found it hard not to exercise the privileges of rank when necessary," notes Stott, "and Shelley had happily passed through the world on a whim, leaving behind a trail of unsettled accounts with solicitors and tradesmen."

A woman brought Byron and Shelley together. She was Claire Clairmont, the step-sister of Mary Godwin, Shelley's young par amour. These women had grown up together in a peculiar home of five children, no two of whom had the same biological parents. At its head stood William Godwin, a novelist and philosopher who embraced the ideals of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French Revolution. He also espoused free love, making him a founding father of the hook-up culture. Mary's mother, the feminist writer Mary

Wollstonecraft, had died shortly after giving birth to her. William Godwin went on to wed Claire's mother. Their London home was a magnet for artists, intellectuals, and politicians. As girls, Mary and Claire heard Coleridge recite "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a poem that would influence *Frankenstein*. Another visitor was Aaron Burr, the former American vice president. In his journal, Burr commented favorably on Mary's drawing skills and Claire's singing voice. In 1816, as Byron prepared to leave England, he received a note from Claire, whom he had not met. Much of the public had taken to shunning Byron, but for some, including Claire,

Shelley to set out for Geneva in search of Byron, with Mary and Claire in tow. They caught up with Byron at a hotel, where the poets became fast friends, eating meals together and boating on the lake. Soon Byron took up residence at the Villa Diodati, along with Polidori, and the house became a gathering spot. Then, on the evening of June 16, as lightning cracked through the air and lit the heavens, the five made a fateful decision to tell spooky stories.

The Shivers

IT SOUNDS LIKE A PITCH FOR A BAD reality-TV show: On a dark and stormy night, a pair of talented, lecherous poets, their lovers, and a brooding doctor with a secret wish agree to try to give each other the shivers. They congregated around a fireplace and Byron read from *Fantasmagoriana*, a book of German ghost stories translated into French. As the evening wore on, he issued a challenge: "We will each write a ghost story," he said.

"Literary history has made much of this announcement," observes Stott. The irony is that the people who used this occasion to make literary history were not the two most likely candidates. Byron managed fewer than 2,000 words, an incomplete piece that commonly goes by the name "Fragment of a Novel." Byron may have described a plan to finish it as a vampire story, but he gave the tale only a day's attention and set it aside in favor of other projects. Shelley generated even less. He "left no trace of a story whatsoever," writes Stott, unless a few lines from his notebook, which Stott calls "a ghostly lyric," deserve to count. If Claire wrote anything—she may have penned a novel—it does not survive.

The doctor's initial effort flopped: "Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady," wrote Mary. Later, though, he wrote a short story called "The Vampyre." It describes the sinister Lord Ruthven, a nobleman who returns from the grave to prey on women—an obvious forerunner to that other aristocratic, undead lothario, Count Dracula. "The Vampyre" had a strange publication history: Polidori seems to have composed it in Switzerland and then forgotten about it. In 1819, an unscrupulous publisher obtained the manuscript and released it without Polidori's permission, crediting the work to Byron. ("If the book is clever it would be base to deprive the real writer—whoever he may be—of his honours," wrote Byron, in a letter that denied authorship. "[A]nd if stupid—I

Books mentioned in this essay:

The Poet and the Vampyre: The Curse of Byron and the Birth of Literature's Greatest Monsters, by Andrew McConnell Stott. Pegasus Books, 434 pages, \$29.95

The Annotated Frankenstein, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, edited by Susan J. Wolfson and Ronald Levaio. Harvard University Press, 400 pages, \$29.95

The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein, by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler. Little, Brown and Company, 400 pages, \$17 (paper)

The Original Frankenstein: Two New Versions: Mary Shelley's Earliest Draft and Percy Shelley's Revised Text, edited by Charles E. Robinson. Vintage Classics, 464 pages, \$14.95

this only added to his allure. Claire proposed an assignation. The poet agreed. ("If a girl of eighteen comes prancing to you at all hours—there is but one way," he wrote to a friend.) He seems not to have liked Claire, but he indulged her company long enough to impregnate her. When he left for Geneva, he did not know of Claire's condition—and Claire, with a naïveté similar to Harriet's, thought that a mutual interest in their unborn child might lead to a permanent and loving relationship. Many years later, she summed up the sad reality: "These ten minutes have discomposed the rest of my life."

Whatever else they accomplished, those ten minutes became the occasion for Percy

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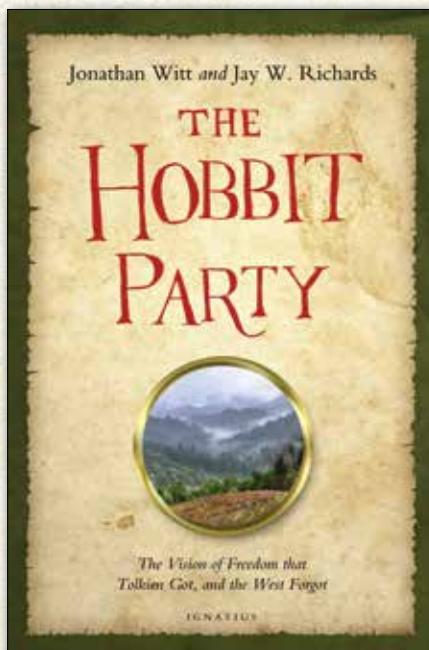
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desire the responsibility of nobody's dullness but my own.")

Many scholars treat "The Vampyre" with disdain, if not petulance. In her 1999 biography of Byron, Benita Eisler labeled the story a "complicated appropriation." In 2002, Fiona MacCarthy leveled a charge of theft, accusing Polidori of having "purloined Byron's original idea." These allegations are grossly unfair—a kind of scholarly bullying that refuses to recognize the flicker of genius in potential competitors. Stott is more measured in his assessment: "The similarities...are clear to see," he writes, before pointing out the indisputable fact that Polidori offered something unique: "the first fully realised vampire in English literature."

No wonder the Byron loyalists are so upset: their man blew his big chance to participate in the creation of one of fiction's great monsters. To be sure, Polidori's character had vampiric antecedents, in works by Robert Southey, Coleridge, Shelley, and even Byron himself. Yet Polidori did more than flesh out a new kind of bloodsucking bad guy: He turned his anti-hero into a compelling metaphor. Stott interprets "The Vampyre" as "an attack on the cult of fame," pointing to how "Ruthven's elevation to a position of celebrity affords the license that allows him to pursue a career of seduction and predation that takes the form of a focused and rapacious misogyny." In other words, the villain of "The Vampyre" behaves as though society's rules don't apply to him. This is a thinly disguised satire of Lord Byron, who refused to trouble himself with fatherhood, fidelity, or any of the other obligations that occupy ordinary people.

Today, "The Vampyre" is mainly a curiosity, an essential entry in anthologies that trace the literary evolution of vampires—an important artifact but hardly an example of horror fiction at its finest. The other major product of that bewitching night in 1816, however, became an enduring classic.

A Waking Dream

MARY SHELLEY WANTED TO MAKE good on Byron's ghost-story dare, but for several days her muse lay mute: "I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations," she wrote of the time. Then she listened to a conversation between Byron and Shelley on the emerging science of galvanism, which demonstrated that electrical currents could stimulate nerves and mus-

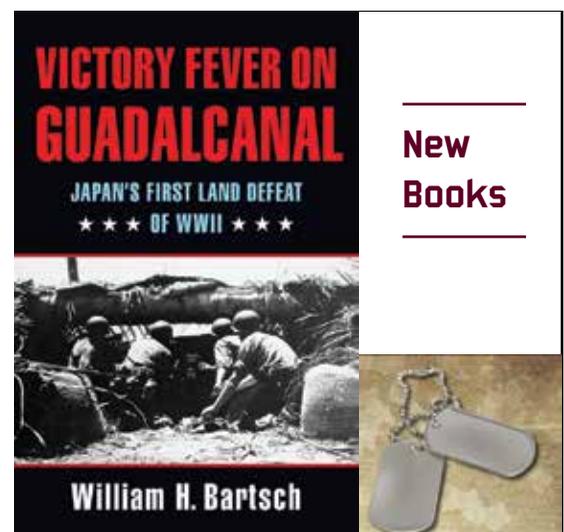
cles, even in corpses. (The name *Frankenstein*, in fact, may owe something to that famous kite-and-lightning experimenter, Benjamin Franklin.) When Mary went to bed, she succumbed to what she called a "waking dream," envisioning a reanimator and his ghastly creation. This was the initial conception of what would become not merely a renowned passage in literature, but also, more than a century later, one of the most famous (and lampooned) scenes ever put on film, as Dr. Frankenstein screams, "It's alive!" On this night, however, the reel played only in Mary's head—and it provided the inspiration for her novel, which she wrote in less than a year. The first edition of *Frankenstein* came out in 1818, when she was just 20 years old.

A controversy has lingered around the book ever since: was Mary really its author? Charles E. Robinson, who has studied the handwritten manuscripts, suspects that Percy may have contributed several thousand words to *Frankenstein*, amounting to

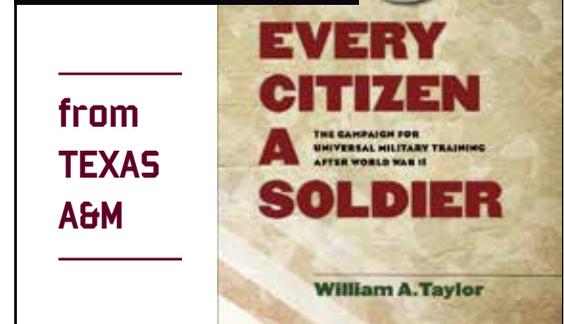
The tale of Byron and Shelley and their circle has all the right ingredients for a Gothic thriller: ambition, rivalry, intrigue, sex, and death.

about 7% of the novel's total—the work of an aggressive editor, not a primary author. In 2008, however, Robinson produced an "original" version of *Frankenstein* and saw fit to call its author "Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (with Percy Bysshe Shelley)." This is too much, unless we want to start elevating editors everywhere, and identifying the author of *The Wasteland*, for example, as "T.S. Eliot (with Ezra Pound)."

These are minor disputes, dwarfed by the significance of the work itself. *Frankenstein* possesses the power of mythology, and one of its achievements is to have replaced the legend of Prometheus in Western culture. The book's full title, in fact, is *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus*, though there's no question about which figure now looms larger in the popular mind. The movies have played a part in this: when we conjure an image of Frankenstein's monster, we usually think of the actor Boris Karloff, transformed by makeup artist Jack Pierce into a black-haired, flat-headed, neck-bolted giant. (The writer Robert Bloch



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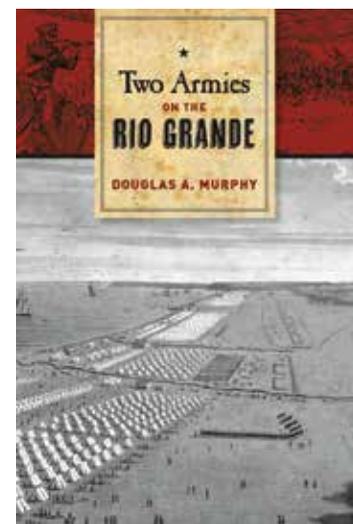
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once hailed Karloff's "esprit de corpse.") Yet the true potency of *Frankenstein* comes from the book and its simple, earnest warning: just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. "Learn from me," says Victor Frankenstein, "how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow." Mary ushered this ancient idea into the brave new world of modern science, where forbidden fruit can take the guise of everything from nuclear energy to genetic modification. Victor Frankenstein, of course, is even bolder and more reckless: he tries to master death itself.

Liberation

FEMINISTS HAVE FLOCKED TO *FRANKENSTEIN* for all of the obvious reasons, from the sex of its author to the novel's themes of bad parenting. Yet it also may be read as a brief against feminism, or at least the kind of feminism that preaches liberation through the rejection of morality. The trouble in the book starts, of course, when Victor tries to bring forth new life without the participation of a woman, let alone a wife, and then refuses to care for his progeny. Mary grew up listening to her father and his friends hail free love and condemn marriage—and then watched men betray women and abandon children. The top offender was her own husband, and at first she abetted his transgressions. He had deserted his wife Harriet, after all, to take up with Mary. When Harriet committed suicide in 1816 (as Mary was writing *Frankenstein*), her

dead body revealed a pregnancy. Who was the father? Nobody knows, though Stott acknowledges that it "may even have been Shelley himself." Not in dispute is the fact that he took lovers as he pleased and even encouraged Mary to sleep with his friend, the writer Thomas Jefferson Hogg.

Perhaps Percy wanted to keep up with Byron's abuses. "I despair of rivaling Lord Byron," he once wrote, speaking of poetry, "and there is no other with whom it is worth contending." When Byron learned of Claire's pregnancy, he might have offered affection and support. Instead, he dashed off a letter to a friend: "Is the brat *mine*?" A child called Allegra came, and Byron treated her mostly with neglect. Tucked away in an Italian convent, she died at the age of five, without either parent at hand. Death surrounded the Byron-Shelley circle. Two months before the recovery of Harriet's body, Mary's stepsister Fanny Imlay overdosed on laudanum, possibly because of her infatuation with Shelley, who chose Mary over her. Children seemed especially vulnerable: three of Mary's died young. Byron and Shelley perished young as well. Shelley went first, at the age of 29 in 1822, when his boat sank in a storm off the coast of Italy. Lord Byron followed two years later, aged 36, while trying to support an independence movement in Greece.

Mary and Claire lived on: Mary died in 1851 and Claire in 1879. Raised in atheism, they eventually found comfort in Christian faith. Mary continued to write, though none of her later stories or novels approached the reputation of *Frankenstein*. She also preserved her husband's poetic legacy, editing and issuing his work in new collections.

She recognized his genius, but also may have understood his great and paradoxical flaw, which historian Paul Johnson has described as "lack of imagination." The poet wrote beautifully about the west wind and the ruins of Ozymandias, but he failed "to penetrate imaginatively the minds and hearts of all those people with whom he had daily dealings"—a failure that allowed him to rip off booksellers and discard wives and mistresses. Byron was no better. When his daughter Allegra died, he displayed an astonishing lack of remorse: "I do not know that I have any thing to reproach in my conduct," he concluded.

Mary Shelley saw a better way. When her single child to reach adulthood was a boy, a friend predicted that given the accomplishments of his ancestors, he would become a great man. "I hope to God," she replied, "he grows up to be an ordinary one." If Mary turned wise, Claire remained bitter. From Byron and Shelley she said she had learned "that a woman without rank, without riches, without male relatives to protect her, is looked upon by men as a thing only fit to have her feelings and her rights trampled on." Frustrated by their posthumous fame—their rising to life after death—she offered a different view of their legacy: "I saw the two first Poets [of] England perhaps of Europe, also men of high birth highly cultivated considered the most refined and honourable specimens of their age, become monsters of lying, meanness, cruelty, and treachery."

John J. Miller is director of the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College and national correspondent for National Review.

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