

BIOGRAPHIES FOR GODWIN-SHELLEY FAMILY TREE

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759–1797)

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), raised by an abusive father and largely responsible for her siblings' upbringing, was an author and feminist whose arguments frequently reflect her concern for reforming education and domestic relations. She is best known for *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). During the collapse of her relationship with Gilbert Imlay (father of her first daughter, Fanny), she wrote *Letters Written During a Brief Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796)—a text William Godwin described as “calculated to make a man in love with its author.” Wollstonecraft and Godwin married shortly before the birth of their daughter Mary, who would later be known as Mary Shelley. Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever ten days after Mary Godwin (later Shelley) was born.



GILBERT IMLAY (1754–1828)

Gilbert Imlay (1754–1828), described by Wil Verhoeven as “perhaps best regarded as an early example of the American con man,” was Mary Wollstonecraft’s romantic partner during the French Revolution. Although the couple did not marry, Imlay declared Wollstonecraft his spouse to offer her the protection afforded Americans during the Terror. The couple had a daughter, Fanny, in 1794, but Imlay proved unfaithful, and a despairing Wollstonecraft attempted suicide. While she recovered, Imlay sent her to Scandinavia to inquire about his business interests; she published the letters she wrote during the trip as *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). When she returned from the trip, she found Imlay had taken up with another woman. Wollstonecraft attempted suicide once again, and once again survived.

WILLIAM GODWIN (1756–1836)

William Godwin (1756–1836) was a political philosopher, novelist, and a founder of the genre that became the detective thriller. His best-known works include *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and *Caleb Williams* (1794). Chronically debt-ridden and frequently threatened with repercussions of his politically radical writing, Godwin raised his large, blended family under extreme stress. When the young Percy Bysshe Shelley sought out his political role model, he met Godwin’s 16-year-old daughter Mary, and they quickly began a romantic relationship.



MARY JANE CLAIMONT (1768–1841)

Mary Jane Clairmont (1768–1841) was William Godwin’s neighbor when they met and quickly married. She brought two children of her own, Jane (who later went by the name Claire Clairmont) and Charles, into the family. In 1803, Mary Jane gave birth to a son, William Godwin, named after his father. By this point, five children lived in the house—and none shared the same two parents. Mary Jane was known for her strong personality, but by all accounts the marriage was a success. The Godwins were often financially strapped, despite running a successful children’s bookshop and publishing company. As Mary Godwin (later Shelley) grew up, she and Mary Jane suffered an increasingly tense relationship—especially after Mary and Jane (Claire) eloped to the Continent with Percy Bysshe Shelley.

FRANCES “FANNY” IMLAY (1794–1816)

Frances Imlay (1794–1816), named for her mother’s friend Frances Blood and called Fanny throughout her life, was adopted by William Godwin after Mary Wollstonecraft’s death. Like her half-sister Mary, she was raised in a lively, intellectual household that set high expectations: her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, later commented that “in our family if you cannot write an epic poem or a novel that by its originality knocks all other novels on the head, you are a despicable creature not worth acknowledging.” Left behind when Claire and Mary ran off to the Continent with Percy Bysshe Shelley, Fanny committed suicide in 1816.

CHARLES CLAIRMONT (1795–1850)

Charles Clairmont (1795–1850) joined the Godwin household when his mother, Mary Jane, married their neighbor, William Godwin.

HARRIET WESTBROOK (1795–1816)

Harriet Westbrook (1795–1816) married Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1811, when she was just 16 years old. By the time P. B. Shelley met Mary Godwin in 1814, Harriet was pregnant with their second child, but for him the marriage was already mostly over. When Harriet committed suicide in 1816, Mary Godwin and P. B. Shelley had already had two children of their own.

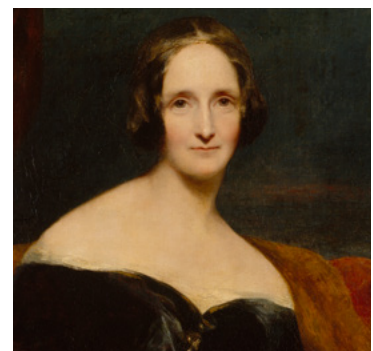
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822)

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), a poet, defied his father’s expectations when he was expelled from Oxford for refusing to deny authorship of “The Necessity of Atheism.” He married Harriet Westbrook in 1811, but the marriage quickly fell apart, and he took up with Mary Godwin (later Mary Shelley) in 1814, abandoning his pregnant wife and young child. After Harriet’s suicide, he unsuccessfully sought custody of their two children. In the last seven years of his life, before he drowned just shy of his 30th birthday, he lost three of his four children by Mary Shelley. Percy Bysshe Shelley was Mary Shelley’s frequent editor, and made suggestions to the text of *Frankenstein* as we know it. Although he was not as popular a poet as his friend Byron in their lifetimes, his poetic legacy was secured in large part through the efforts of his widow. He is now best known for poems such as “Ozymandias,” “Queen Mab,” and “Adonais,” an elegy for John Keats.



MARY SHELLEY (1797–1851)

Mary Shelley (1797–1851) is best known as the author of *Frankenstein* (1818), but she wrote novels, essays, and short fiction throughout her life. Raised in an intellectual household under the shadow of her mother’s death just ten days after her own birth, Mary must have been, as she later wrote of Percy Bysshe Shelley, “very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame.” She ran off with Shelley at 16 and began writing the novel that would secure her fame at just 18 years old. Her life began with the tragedy of her mother’s death, and tragedy would continue to follow her, as she lost three of four children and her husband before her 25th birthday. She raised her remaining child, Percy Florence Shelley, on a



meager allowance from her father-in-law, supplemented by her earnings as a writer. When she died of a brain tumor in 1851, she had already secured her legacy as author of one of the greatest works of English literature.

WILLIAM GODWIN, JR. (1803–1832)

William Godwin, Jr. (1803–1832), spent a wayward youth before settling into a career as a journalist for *The Morning Chronicle*. Like others in his famous family, he tried his hand at a variety of literary genres, but with little success. After he died of cholera at 29, his father arranged for the posthumous publication of his novel *Transfusion* (1835).

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT (1798–1879)

Clara Mary Jane Clairmont (1798–1879) was known as Jane in childhood, but later chose to go by the name Claire. Like her half-brother Charles, she joined the Godwin household when her mother married William Godwin. She joined her stepsister Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley when they eloped to the Continent in 1814. In 1815, she initiated a relationship with the famous poet Lord Byron, who was unhappily married to Annabella Milbanke. It was at her request that Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley agreed to travel to Switzerland to meet up with Byron and his doctor, John Polidori. During the fateful summer of 1816, Byron challenged the group to write ghost stories, which led to two of the most iconic monsters in British literature, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819). Claire returned from the trip pregnant with the child who would eventually be known as Allegra Biron.

LORD BYRON (1788–1824)

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), wrote that after the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, "I awoke one morning and found myself famous." It was probably his celebrity as a poet that compelled Claire Clairmont to proposition him in 1815, even though he was unhappily married at the time. Although his relationship with Claire was brief, it forever entangled Byron with the Shelley-Godwin family: in addition to fathering a child by Claire, Byron formed a literary friendship with the Shelleys that began that fateful summer of 1816, when they stayed at the Villa Diodati. Long interested in global struggles for liberty, Byron died of a fever in 1824 while he was on his way to join the Greek independence movement.

ANNABELLA MILBANKE (1792–1860)

Byron proposed to Annabella Milbanke twice before she accepted and they married in 1815. The marriage quickly turned sour as Byron's behavior scandalized the morally upright Annabella. By the time the couple separated in 1816, shortly after the birth of their daughter, Annabella believed her husband was certifiably mad.

IANTHE AND CHARLES SHELLEY

After Harriett Westbrook's suicide in 1816, a custody battle ensued, and Percy Bysshe Shelley lost custody of Ianthe and Charles, the children of his first marriage. The court used P. B. Shelley's radical politics and professed atheism, as expressed in his poem "Queen Mab" (1813), as grounds for denying custody. When Charles died at eleven, Percy Florence became heir to the Shelley estates, and P. B. Shelley's father became slightly more generous in the allowance he paid to Mary Shelley for his upkeep.

THE SHELLEY CHILDREN

Only one of the Shelleys' four children survived. The first, a girl whose name, if she had one, has been lost to the ages, lived only a few weeks. William and Clara died as toddlers, and the Shelleys were childless before the birth of their fourth and last child, Percy Florence. Percy Florence—known as Sir Percy Florence after he inherited the baronetcy upon the death of his grandfather—lived a long and seemingly happy life. He and his wife Jane preserved the legacy of his famous parents, building a shrine to them in their home and relocating the graves of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin to Dorset, where they were laid to rest together.

ALLEGRA BIRON (1817–1822)

Allegra Biron (1817–1822) was first named Alba after the nickname Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys used to refer to Lord Byron, Albè, for its aural similarity to his initials, L. B. Byron renamed the child Allegra and gave her an altered version of his surname to distinguish her from her legitimate half-sister, Ada. Allegra died of typhus fever in an Italian convent when she was five years old; she was buried at Harrow, her father's school. Her mother Claire vocally mourned the child's death until the end of her own life more than fifty years later.

ADA LOVELACE (1815–1852)

Raised under her mother's strict supervision, Ada Byron (1815–1852), better known as Ada Lovelace, never knew her father—and was kept as far removed from his poetic and personal reputation as possible. She was a brilliant mathematician who wrote algorithms to be carried out by a hypothetical computer, and she is often considered the first computer programmer.