

Mary Shelley: Prometheus trivialized

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Haifaa al-Mansour; screenplay by Emma Jensen, with additional writing by al-Mansour

A new film biography of Mary Shelley (1797-1851) directed by Saudi female filmmaker Haifaa al-Mansour, coincides with the 200th anniversary of the publication of Shelley's most famous work, the Gothic masterpiece *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*.

Unhappily, as is presently the case with most films about history and historical figures, *Mary Shelley* does not delve deeply into the period that shaped its central characters—Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, towering literary personalities born into a revolutionary age. Al-Mansour's movie, for the most part, handles them clumsily, attempting to impose on them the narrow concerns of the filmmakers and to construct—although, fortunately, without complete success—a tale of “feminist empowerment.”

Mary Shelley also had remarkable parents. Her mother, who died of complications a few days after her daughter's birth, was Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Her father, William Godwin, a journalist and novelist (the outstanding *Caleb Williams*, 1794), was a prominent figure in radical circles in London in the 1790s—and a friend of Tom Paine. Both Godwin and Wollstonecraft were profoundly influenced by the American and French Revolutions.

Al-Mansour's *Mary Shelley* opens with a scene of creditors banging on the door of a popular bookstore belonging to Mary's father, Mr. Godwin (Stephen Dillane). Teenage Mary (Elle Fanning) frequently visits her mother's nearby grave.

Speaking with Godwin about her mother, Mary asserts: “She was so full of passion. So full of defiance. As if she were at war constantly with everyone and everything. And enjoying every moment of the battle.” Her father replies: “Warriors like your mother are never long for this world.”

Godwin then sends Mary to stay with relatives in Scotland, where she meets Percy Shelley (Douglas Booth). She's told, “He's a radical poet. He thinks poetry should reform society.” To her future spouse, she remarks that she would like to write “anything that curdles the blood and quickens the beatings of the heart.”

Besotted with Mary, Percy waxes lyrical:

Poor captive bird!

Who, from thy narrow cage

Pourest such music, that it might assuage

The rugged hearts of those who prisoned thee

Were they not deaf towards sweet melody

This song shall be thy rose, its petals pale

Are dead, indeed, my adored Nightingale!”

(*Epipyschidion*—although apparently the work was not, in fact, written for Mary Godwin)

The poet speaks to Mary about marriage: “People should live and love as they wish. But one thing I've never understood is ... why did two radicals such as your parents succumb to marriage?” Further, Shelley suggests to Mary that “Thrones, altars ... judgement seats, and prisons, they are all part of one gigantic, despotic system ... designed to crush the soul of Man. Their empty covenant has no power over us. I fear not of

God, or His henchmen on Earth.”

Despite a few emotional bumps when Mary learns that Percy is still married to his estranged wife Harriet and has a daughter (Percy: “It is an intolerable tyranny ... to bind husband and wife to cohabitation after the decay of their affection”), she elopes with Percy without her father's approval. Godwin warns his daughter: “Your mother was tortured by her impulses. The very passions she thought were holding her together were working just as diligently to tear her apart. Don't let them get the better of you, Mary.”

Percy, Mary and the latter's stepsister Claire Clairmont (Bel Powley) set up house in London. But publishers are not buying Percy's work and his father has cut off his allowance. Nonetheless, Mary tells Percy, “You make everything seem possible.” She is now pregnant.

Not long after, Mary meets Percy's close friend Thomas Hogg (Jack Hickey): “We [Percy and Thomas] began writing a novel together back at Oxford but publishers deemed it too subversive. We had more success with our treatise which we wrote anonymously: ‘The Necessity of Atheism.’” The latter work, Hogg tells Mary, “resulted in our expulsion from Oxford.”

At a Phantasmagoria [carnival], Mary is introduced to the concept of “reanimation” or “galvanism”—electricity's supposed potential to bring organisms to life, a subject of controversy in scientific circles (Luigi Galvani vs. Alessandro Volta) at the time. She also encounters Lord Byron (Tom Sturridge), by whom Claire soon becomes pregnant. Before long, Percy, Mary, their daughter Clara and Claire are obliged to flee their creditors. Sadly, Clara does not survive, and Claire, Percy and an inconsolable Mary travel to Byron's estate in Geneva, Switzerland.

It is there (during the cold, rainy summer of 1816) that Mary conceives of writing *Frankenstein*, the fantastic account of a dedicated young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who creates a human-like creature out of various body parts. Unfortunately, the “monster” is hideous and Victor spurns him, with terrible consequences.

This is a memorable passage from Frankenstein's narrative: “*It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.*”

The creature later remonstrates with Frankenstein, “*I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.*” The book remains vivid and evocative two centuries later.

After an exhaustive search, Mary finds a publisher and informs Percy that “500 copies will be printed. It will be published anonymously, provided you write the introduction.”

A meeting to celebrate the success of *Frankenstein* takes place in

Godwin's bookstore. The proprietor proudly proclaims that his young daughter's novel is "a remarkable story asserting, as it does, the ... absolute human necessity for connection. ... If only Frankenstein had been able to bestow upon his creation a compassionate touch. A kind word. What a tragedy might have been avoided ... I know you all agree [the book] is one of the most complete and certainly one of the most original publications of our age."

Percy reveals to the assembly that, contrary to rumor, Mary is the sole author of *Frankenstein*. The couple stay together until Percy's death in a tragic boating accident. Mary's voiceover ends the movie: "You were soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance."

As indicated, al-Mansour's film *Mary Shelley* does have some serious moments and has the merit of arousing interest in extraordinary people and extraordinary times. However, on the whole, it does little justice to the titanic era of the American and French Revolutions, as well as the Napoleonic Wars and the industrial revolution, in other words, the very conditions that made these individuals so extraordinary.

The film tends to substitute for those wider concerns, in the director's words, the "true story of a woman who railed against the constraints of her society to create a story that would outlive the work of her contemporaries, including her brilliant parents and husband." This is very limited (and not necessarily true), and Elle Fanning's scowl and somewhat self-pitying air are presumably aimed at sustaining that conception.

In an 1843 article, Friedrich Engels observed that in England "Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes." He repeated the comment in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* and praised Byron for "his glowing sensuality and his bitter satire upon our existing society."

Mary Shelley is a fascinating person in her own right, having penned *Frankenstein* when she was only 18! Many of her novel's themes and motifs retain their vitality and freshness.

For example: "*Even broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature. The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth. Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet, when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures.*"

Another striking passage: "*It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.*"

Little of this literary genius and progressive sentiment finds its way into *Mary Shelley*. One of the most curious and unpleasant aspects of the film is its portrayal of Lord Byron, presented as a dissolute cad and irresponsible womanizer—the "blood-sucking devourer of souls," as one character puts it. Sturridge has seemingly been directed to make Byron as unappealing as humanly possible.

The filmmakers don't quite dare treat the other male protagonist, Percy, in the same manner—although he receives a few smacks on the head—because, after all, Mary chooses to stay with him until his death. The heroine's mate must, therefore, have a few redeeming qualities, certainly more than poor Byron!

In spite of itself, the movie does hint at Byron's brilliance, quoting from one of the most beautiful poems in the English language, his *She Walks in Beauty*:

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes...*

As Engels pointed out, Byron once wrote in his journal, "I have simplified my politics into an utter devastation of all existing governments." In Canto IX of *Don Juan*, Byron elaborates:

*And I will war at least in words (and should
My chance so happen—deeds), with all who war
With thought; and of thought's foes by far most rude,
Tyrants and sycophants have been and are.
I know not who may conquer. If I could
Have such a prescience, it should be no bar
To this my plain, sworn, downright detestation
Of every despotism in every nation.*

Along these lines, and to counter the quasi-negative perception of Percy cultivated in the film, it is worth citing one of his most famous works, where he pours venom on the powers that be:

*England in 1819
An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.
A people starved and stabbed in th' untilled field;
An army, whom liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed—
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.*

What *Mary Shelley* fails to consider is that the *tumultuous and often painful personal relationships* in the movie, especially for these politically conscious individuals, had a connection to the immense pressures exerted by *tumultuous and often painful times*. The Shelleys and Byron were living and creating under the extremely reactionary conditions that resulted from the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which restored the monarchy or traditional dynasties in France, Austria, Prussia, Spain, Sardinia, Tuscany and the Papal states. Everything the characters despised was smugly, triumphantly and safely back in power, at least for the time being. Ignoring this, the filmmakers' attitude owes too much to ahistorical moralizing.

Eleanor Marx and her partner Edward Aveling added another dimension to the discussion of the Shelleys in an article they co-wrote in 1888, "Shelley and Socialism."

Percy Shelley, they commented, "was the child of the French Revolution." The poet saw in the 1789 revolution "an incident of the movement towards a reconstruction of society. He flung himself into politics, and yet he never ceased singing." The authors argued that Shelley's "ideas are finding expression in the social-democratic movement of our own day. Thus Shelley was on the side of the *bourgeoisie* when struggling for freedom, but ranged against them when in their turn they became the oppressors of the working-class. ... We claim him as a Socialist."

Marx and Aveling pointedly asserted that "not enough has been made of the influence upon him [Shelley] of the two Marys; Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley. It was one of Shelley's 'delusions that are not delusions' that man and woman should be equal and united; and in his own life and that of his wife he not only saw this realised, but saw the possibility of that realisation in lives less keen and strong than theirs."

The co-authors noted that all through the great poet's work, "this oneness with his wife shines out," most notably in *Laon and Cythna* (1817, later retitled *The Revolt of Islam*). They wrote movingly, "In the dedication to the history of their suffering, their work, their struggle, their

triumph and their love, Mary is 'his own heart's home, his dear friend
beautiful and calm and free.'”

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