



Death and the Maidens: Fanny Wollstonecraft and the Shelley circle

By Janet Todd

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From the Romantic period's star circle, the story of its saddest casualty--Fanny Wollstonecraft, daughter of an original feminist, sister of a literary star, and hopeful object of a poet's affection, dead of suicide at the age of nineteen.

Little contemporary information was written about Fanny Wollstonecraft, whose mother Mary Wollstonecraft's scandalous life scarred Fanny's possibilities before she was even born. Deserted by her father, yet reared by Mary's husband William Godwin, Fanny barely had a chance to adjust when her mother died from giving birth to the legitimate and lovely Mary. Fanny was always considered the ungainly one, the plain one, the less intelligent one. Finally her imagination was sparked by the arrival of Percy Bysshe Shelley to the Godwin household. Her infatuation was quickly shattered when Shelley, like so many before him, chose the company of her sister instead, and though Fanny bore this rejection bravely, she was never quite the same after Mary and Shelley eloped along with her step-sister Claire--who would later track down and seduce Lord Byron.

Awash in a sea of sexual radicals, Fanny acted as personal assistant and go-between to this den of hedonists, shuttling information from one faction to the other, covering her sister's lies and creating fabrications of her own. She ultimately ended her life alone in a Welsh seaside hotel, an empty bottle of laudanum and an unsigned note by her side.

Janet Todd's meticulously researched and brilliantly told rendering of this life give fresh and fascinating insight to the Shelley-Byron world even as it draws Fanny out of the shadows of her mother's and sister's stunning careers.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. It is little surprise that there has been no major biography of Fanny Wollstonecraft—first daughter, by an American lover, of brilliant feminist theorist Mary Wollstonecraft and elder half-sister of *Frankenstein* author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Fanny produced no books, lived in the shadow of others and found her feelings for Percy Bysshe Shelley ignored, as the poet favored, then married, Mary. Fanny spent a great deal of time as a go-between, helping smooth over the endless sexual and social intrigues of the Shelley and Byron circle. Realizing none of her own dreams, she committed suicide in 1816 at the age of 22. There are moments of terrific insight, such as Mary's odd, confused reaction to Fanny's death and her transforming Fanny into the ill-fated servant girl Justine in *Frankenstein*, who is unjustly accused of killing a child. Todd has rescued Fanny from ill-deserved obscurity, yet the biography is more of a meditation on the role of all of the women in Byron and Shelley's circle, and its power lies in Todd's soundly and generously feminist reimagining of these women's lives. Not only a splendid work of feminist history, this is an important addition to late 18th- and early 19-century literary criticism. (Oct.)

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About the Author

Janet Todd is Professor of English Literature at the University of Aberdeen, and the author of many books on early women writers, including the biographies *Mary Wollstonecraft* and *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. She lives in Glasgow, Scotland, and Cambridge, England.

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