In Search of

MARY SHELLEY

The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein

FIONA SAMPSON

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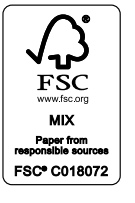

Contents

List of Illustrations

11. Villa Diodati, on the banks of Lake Geneva, (Furlane Images / Alamy)
12. Manuscript page from one of the *Frankenstein* notebooks (Photo: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)
13. The Protestant Cemetery in Testaccio, Rome, *c.* 1905–8 (De Agostini/Fototeca Inasa/Getty)
14. Lady Mountcashell, née Margaret Jane King, Engraving by Edme Quenedey des Ricets, 1801 (Pforzheimer Collection, New York Public Library).
15. *William Shelley*, 1819, painted by Amelia Curran (Pforzheimer Collection, New York Public Library)
16. View of Bagni di Lucca, Tuscany, copper engraving, from *Corografia fisica, storica e statistica dell'Italia e delle sue isole, by Attilio Zuccagni-Orlandini, 1837–1845*, published in Florence (De Agostini Picture Library/Contributor/Getty)
17. Casa Magni, San Terenzo, near Lerici, Italy (Lebrecht Music and Arts Photo Library/Alamy
18. *George Gordon Byron*, 1813, painted by Richard Westall © National Portrait Gallery, London
19. Portrait of Alexandros Mavrokordatos (1791–1865). Oil painting, nineteenth century, Unknown artist. © 2017 The Benaki Museum, Athens
20. *Sir Timothy Shelley,* 1791, painting by George Romney (NYPL Collections)
21. *Jane Williams*, painted by George Clint (Public domain)
22. Edward John Trelawny, *c.* 1860 (Hulton Archive/Getty)
23. An early photograph of Field Place, Sussex (culture Club/Hulton Archive/Getty)
24. *Mary Shelley*, 1839, portrait by Richard Rothwell (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Introduction

Henry Frankenstein: Look! It's moving. It's alive. It's alive … It's alive, it's moving. It's alive! It's alive, it's alive, it's alive!
It's ALIVE!
Victor Moritz: In the name of God!
Henry: Now I know what it feels like to BE God!

Frankenstein, 1931 film

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS, and most parodied, moments in cinema. The set piece twenty-five minutes into the first feature-length *Frankenstein* film, in which Dr Frankenstein exults as his monster's fingers begin to move, is genuinely uncanny. It is also very funny.

Generations have found this mixture of hilarity and horror irresistible. I remember primary school playtimes when we ran screaming round the yard while boys lurched after us with their arms held rigidly in front of them. We didn't really know whether they were being Frankenstein's Monster, the Curse of the Mummy's Tomb or one of the Living Dead, and that was part of the point. The monster had stopped being a specific character in some long-ago book or film. He had become part of our shared imagination, and he could do whatever we thought he could. In

the rainy yard we used him in games about pirates, games of tag and especially, of course, in kiss chase. At any moment a boy could turn into the Monster, trumping the rules of whatever we were playing – and we'd scatter screaming. To be the one he singled out was a thrill and a terror, because there's something uncanny about the human who isn't quite a human. Masks serve purposes of enchantment, turning priests and actors alike into something more than their ordinary selves. And Frankenstein's Monster, as acted out in the schoolyard, was genuinely frightening and unpredictable in ways that the boys themselves were not.

'Frankenstein films' have had their own spawning, every bit as monstrous as the creature's own. They've become both a discrete horror movie sub-genre and one of the most fertile grounds of remakes ever. The classic 1931 film of *Frankenstein* alone remade the three silent movies that had preceded it, and launched a Universal Studios series of eight Frankenstein-themed movies in the 1930s and 1940s. Later the baton would pass across the Atlantic to Hammer Film Productions, who between 1957 and 1974 released a further seven movies, most starring Peter Cushing as Dr Frankenstein. These serial shlock horrors had brilliantly broad-brush titles: the American series included *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein,* the British *Frankenstein Created Woman* and *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell*. At least a dozen further films that retell the original story – or at least *a* story – of the monster's creation have appeared since then. Which is to say nothing of the tremendous mushrooming, since the Sixties, of Frankenstein-themed TV programmes, comic books, graphic novels and manga, video games, jokes, music, stage shows, popular fiction, toys, and allusions from *Blade Runner* to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Much of the genre's appeal stems from its sheer unbelievability. Like pantomime Dames, who fail gleefully in their attempts to impersonate women, the Frankenstein genre revels in implausibility. It is so much camp nonsense and yet, as is the way of camp, it gives us a peek at one of our primitive anxieties – before we run off screaming. If the Dame lets us play with our anxieties about gender, Frankenstein's monster lets us play with the anxieties we have about human nature itself. James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein,* badly acted by badly made-up actors in a magnificent set, is

perfect camp. But even it manages to include genuine sentimentality: *the miracle of life!* It's this oscillation between the meaningful and the ridiculous that our culture has been playing with for decades.

Yet in Mary Shelley's original novel *Frankenstein* the weird nativity is completed in just one sentence:

> 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.

And almost everything about this scene differs from the one popular culture has fixed in our minds. The moment in which Mary's creature comes to life is un-witnessed, except by a far from exultant Dr Frankenstein himself. The setting for the transformation isn't a laboratory, just a 'solitary chamber, or rather a cell, at the top of the house'. Man and monster aren't surrounded by gleaming equipment, occult with modernity, or even by nonsense machinery in the great British tradition that runs from William Heath Robinson to Nick Park's *Wallace and Gromit*. Above all, the novel gives us a scene not of success but of failure.

For Mary Shelley's imagination doesn't snag on the apparatus of physical transformation. Her novel is an exploration of the consequences of *being* a monster, and it is not a comedy but a tragedy, as her choice for the book's epigraph makes clear:

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
> To mould me Man? Did I solicit thee
> From darkness to promote me?

It's the cry of protest that Adam makes to God in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's tough, often bitter, retelling of the Biblical account of human creation. When I actually read *Frankenstein*, some time in my teens, I was astonished and relieved to discover that this was a story about selves and their feelings. I was moved by Frankenstein's creature, destined by an ugliness that's not of his choosing to a life of loneliness. He's an easy figure to identify with for any teenager coping with a newly grown body and not yet, perhaps, feeling secure about the world of sexual agency – or even dating. I had less sympathy for Frankenstein himself. His good

looks seemed to me no excuse for a failure to live up to his moral obligations. All the same, I was caught by the book's shifting, ambivalent sympathies. Although its narrator insisted that Frankenstein was good, the narrative only seemed to show him being bad. It was the first time I had found myself being forced by a story to decide who was right – to choose between two truths – and I was shaken.

I had anticipated a sci-fi novel crammed with hardware, and instead, against all expectations, I was thoroughly engaged. But of course Mary Shelley would never have written science fiction. Modernity was not her chief concern, even if experiments in living were, and she could certainly have had no way to understand modernism – leave alone postmodernity. She lived in the Romantic era, when European culture was trying to build sense outwards from the individual self. The investigation of human experience by Idealist philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had led to revolutionary questioning of that human's rights across Europe, and would also define some of the forms that human knowledge could take. 'Romanticism' was the term invented around the turn of the century for the effect of this new way of thinking on the arts, where it made emotion and experience primary.

Mary's version of this *zeitgeist* was both very new and rooted in a Classical education. *Frankenstein*'s subtitle is 'The Modern Prometheus', and the Greek myth of the Titan who creates humans in an almost mechanical way was being revisited by Romantic artists as an alternative to the story of divine creation. Goethe had published his poem 'Prometheus' in 1789; Beethoven composed his *The Creatures of Prometheus* in 1801 (the ballet has disappeared, but the overture entered the repertoire). In the year of *Frankenstein*'s publication, Mary's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, started work on his own verse drama on the theme, *Prometheus Unbound*.

I don't think I was alone in my ignorance about Mary Shelley and her novel. When I was a teenager, its author was chiefly remembered as the poet's wife. Sometimes she also had an honourable mention as a one-hit wonder who had somehow – perhaps inadvertently? – come up with 'the Frankenstein idea': the notion that if humans play God with the 'instruments of life' they will produce something monstrous. The date stamps showed that my battered library copy of *Frankenstein* had not

been borrowed recently. Though in the late twentieth century the novel form was seen, at least in the West, as *the* 'great' literary form, and that greatness often seemed to be as much a question of scale as of depth. The model, at least for a non-academic, general reader like me, was still late nineteenth-century fiction – that almost symphonic creation – and its reception not dissimilar to that for the bloated symphonic orchestral pieces of that same period. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century work like *Frankenstein* was seen as transitional, primitive: the first steps towards inventing a form that would become fully fledged only once it had sized up.

None of this is how we think about Mary Shelley now. She has been claimed by scholars and literary biographers, contradictorily both as the author of a canonical novel and as part of a tradition of serious women writers largely excluded from that very canon. The facts of her life have been excavated by her biographers. They've also been revisited by those more interested in her husband. Some have believed the poet's grumbles about her, not remembering that he was at the very least a subjective, embroiled witness to his own marriage: hardly a reliable narrator. One cohort, who accuse Mary of unfaithful editing of her husband's poems, even seem to assume that the grieving widow had access to twenty-first-century research facilities and training in today's archival best practice: a curious precursor of how the survivor of another great British literary couple, Ted Hughes, would face similar accusations when he produced the posthumous editions that ensured Sylvia Plath's reputation.

Reading these multiplying accounts can feel like squinting at a radar screen. Mary Shelley was a literary star. But too often she appears as little more than a bright spot being tracked as she moves from one location to another. This is no replacement for encountering the person herself. We know *where* Mary Shelley was, yet I still find myself looking for her. Like the monster she created in *Frankenstein*, she seems to race ahead of us 'with more than mortal speed':

> Amidst the wilds of Tartary and Russia, although he still evaded me, I have ever followed in his track. Sometimes the peasants, scared by this horrid apparition, informed me of his path; sometimes he himself, who feared that if I lost all traces of him, I should despair

> and die, left some mark to guide me. The snows descended on my head, and I saw the print of his huge step on the white plain.

But, unlike her monster, Mary Shelley does not need fictionalising. She deserves better than imaginative reconstruction: she deserves to be listened to. Her letters, journals and publications, and those of her friends and colleagues, tell us a great deal about what she actually felt and thought. Mary Shelley is not a fictional character. She was a real person, sometimes paradoxical and at other times predictable, and as complicated to get to know as anyone else. It's this real person, full of living contradictions, who often seems to be hollowed out from accounts of her life and of her circle. This all the more surprising because the Romantic movement in general, and Mary's writing in particular, is so much concerned with the psychological. After all, the great plea of her most famous novel is that we should understand who Frankenstein's creature is *to himself* – his own feelings and motives – rather than judging on appearances.

Mary wrote that plea astonishingly early in what was already becoming a sometimes heartbreakingly difficult life. She started work on her most famous novel when she was only eighteen, and when it was published she was still no more than twenty. Each time, over the years, that I reread her *Frankenstein*, its plea for understanding seemed more audible. I wondered who she could possibly be, this teenage author of not one but two of our culture's most enduring archetypes: the inventor not just of the scientist with no thought for consequences but also of the near-human that he creates. Who *was* the unmarried teenage mother who attended Lord Byron's house party on Lake Geneva and responded to his playful challenge to write a ghost story, one of the first and surely among the most influential 'creative writing' exercises in literary history? What extraordinary resources did she draw on to become a major writer, in an era when women mostly 'knew their place' as literary muses rather than protagonists? And what was it about her – as well as her pure exceptionalism – that so often seemed to bring out the worst in those around her?

The most enduring image of Mary's *Frankenstein* is, for me, her story's ending, in which the creature goes out, alone again, onto the Arctic ice to die. It is the original 'fade to white'. If we're not careful, the same thing happens – again and again – to the woman who created that image. I

want to rewind the film: to bring Mary closer to us, and closer again, until she's hugely enlarged in close-up. I want to see the actual texture of her existence, caught in freeze-frame. I want to ask what we do in fact know about who and how and why she is – who she is – and about *how it is for her.*

Of course, there are disadvantages to this approach. One is that a freeze-frame is a form of tableau, which asks a single moment to represent a wealth of incident and information that doesn't make it into the chosen image. Another is that viewing Mary like this produces a kind of foreshortening. To put it another way: we see everything that's 'in front of', or leads up to, the given moment; we don't necessarily see what happens when our characters are released into movement after that moment has passed. But this, of course, is how we picture human events. We see the motivation prior to the action, and think in terms of decisions that get us to certain points at certain junctures. Indeed we visualise entire life stories this way: it isn't only psychoanalysts, or Jesuits, who believe that the child is father to the man.

And so it is that the rules of perspective apply even to a freeze-frame biography. Mary's youth, and her life with Percy Bysshe Shelley, take up more space in this kind of storytelling than the equal number of years of her widowhood, in which she was able to settle into a literary life of her own. This isn't because she was a one-hit wonder; she was not. It is because the later years of a life – of anyone's life – do not build a personality, and they don't go on to affect a future. They *are* that future. *Frankenstein* is not unconnected to what comes after it in Mary's life. On the contrary, it changed her life just as it has changed our cultural imagination. But that's the thing: Mary's first novel informs her future; her last does not inform her past.

When Mary's silver ghost steps away from her and comes towards us it's the future, not the past, that it is on its way to haunt. We are all haunted by our own childhoods, with their particular dreams and nightmares. The Frankensteins of the schoolyard that haunt my dreams – or yours – aren't quite the monsters that haunted Mary's. But they are kissing kin.

Part One

THE INSTRUMENTS OF LIFE

Chapter 1

The Instruments of Life

To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death.

WE KNOW A GOOD DEAL about the circumstances of Mary's birth in 1797, in an August bedroom in Middlesex, on the outskirts of London. We know, for example, that it is nearly midnight on 30 August, and that there's a smell of damp countryside coming in at the window on the night air. Attracted by the light, crane flies and moths skitter on the windowsill. The waxing moon is only just half full.

A new family – the Godwins – are grouped together at the bed. The healthy baby who's just been born is being introduced by her mother, the famous radical writer Mary Wollstonecraft, to the delighted father, fellow radical and philosopher William Godwin. Light from the household's oil lamps – brought upstairs for the tremendous occasion of this birth – concentrates in all three faces, finding them the way it does in one of those studies of the Holy Family by Rembrandt, where lantern light falls out of a tender chiaroscuro darkness on to the family group. Rembrandt's paintings tell us to trust the light because it finds where the action is, and is always on the side of the protagonists. And tonight's lamplight gives everyone a healthy glow even as it covers up less attractive details, such as blood-stained sheets and towels, with tactful shadow.

The bedroom is at the top of a smart four-storey town house: actually there are five storeys if you count the garrets overhead. The house has only recently been built in low-lying, clay fields just north of London. On farmland to the east and south, ghostly roads have been marked up. A small grid of streets peters out between half-built shells, the bumpy outline of foundations, surveyor's tape straggling between clumps of dock and nettle. In the dark it would be hard to tell whether these are ruins disappearing into the soil or new structures rising out of it. In fact, they are what's left of Brill Farm. Its upwardly mobile owner, Charles Cocks, recently elevated to become First Baron Somers of Evesham, has leased them to a local architect, Jacob Leroux, who has great plans as well as a fine track record. He's already made a career on the south coast. But he also has a decidedly un-English name. Perhaps it's for this reason – or perhaps just to clinch the deal – that he has flatteringly called the development that will surely make his *own* name after its landlord.

In the summer of 1797 Somers Town is not yet in the shadow of the still un-envisaged railways that will slice up this northern entrance to the metropolis. Tonight it remains an aspirational address, the sort of place where respectability can be invented and rehearsed until, with a bit of luck, it turns into security. This is an immigrant area, where many inhabitants are learning how to be bourgeois in the English way. Life here must sometimes feel like playing at house, and not only for newly-weds like the parents in our nativity tableau. There are strange clothes to try on. Contemporary Englishwomen's fashion nods towards the neo-Classical in a way that echoes French Directoire style, with its high-pitched, largely exposed breasts; and Beau Brummell is cutting a high-society dash that puts pressure on men to keep up with their women. Then there's the odd diet. The British are obsessed with meat. Currently fashionable is the Revd Dr John Trusler's 1788 tome *The Honours of the Table* (which includes a guide to the arts of carving so thorough that it will still be a key text in the 1930s). More coffee is being drunk in England than anywhere else in the world, but the ruinously expensive national drink is tea. In fact, so expensive has it become that a special offence of reusing tea-leaves has been created.

All this may seem like costume drama to us, but it is being played

for real. The high stakes for these tenants include staying out of debtor's prison, particularly in the current economic downturn. The Panic of 1796–7, though largely North American, has added to the strains already placed on the British economy by war with France, which has been dragging on since 1793. Indeed, when the architect of this whole ambitious development dies, less than two years from now, his executors will auction off the entire half-built estate. The sale that takes place at the Somers Town Coffee House on 30 June 1799 exposes shaky foundations to Jacob Leroux's prosperity – and to the district he has created: 'the whole held for long terms at very low ground-rents, part let on lease and part to tenants at will; the annual rental £62 8s. per annum.' Even the sale announcement in *The Times* acknowledges that this does not amount to a profitable investment. Forty lots 'will be sold without the least reserve' – with no reserve price – as will Leroux's own 'capital spacious family home' near by, with its 'coach-house, stable, and garden about three quarters of an acre'. The chaotic, inconsistent system of tenancies he leaves behind reveals that Somers Town has Leroux in over his head: a gifted architect isn't necessarily a gifted speculator.

It's Leroux himself, for example, who tipped off baby Mary's father about a cheap let going at 29 the Polygon. The tip-off seems characteristically generous on Leroux's part, but it may also be politically motivated. Although he's Covent Garden born and bred, Leroux's surname is undeniably French in origin. His mother's maiden name, Bonet, is French too. This may be coincidence, but it's the kind that goes along with membership of a community. A century earlier, after the 1685 Edict of Fontainebleau made Protestantism in France illegal, up to fifty thousand Huguenots arrived in England. These were skilled migrants, glass and textile workers with the latest techniques up their sleeves, and they were welcomed with governmental and charitable subsidies, and by the naturalisation offered under the 1708 Foreign Protestants Naturalisation Act. In contrast, just the year before this story opens, the 1796 renewal of the Aliens Act has forced all *émigrés* away from coastal areas, causing the thousands of more recent – and Catholic – refugees from the French Revolution of 1789 to settle in the English capital. Despite their religious differences, the Huguenot community is helping these newcomers.

Somers Town is particularly welcoming: it has the closest housing to St Pancras Church, which is one of the few sites in London where Catholics can be buried. The Abbé Carron, practical and spiritual leader of the local refugee community, lives at 1 the Polygon itself.

Tonight's new mother is in a sense also a refugee from the Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who on the August night when she gives birth to her second daughter, Mary, is well known for the revolutionary *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), has recently escaped France with her first child, Fanny, who was born there. Her husband, William Godwin, anarchist and utilitarian, published the equally influential and similarly radical *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* just four years ago.

The couple's new baby daughter will remain at 29 the Polygon for the first ten years of her life. During that decade Bloomsbury will fill the fields that at present lie beyond the new road to Paddington, and settlement will straggle up Pancras Place. Soon cheap rents and multiple occupancies will come to characterise a neighbourhood that symbolises the very opposite of respectability. Within thirty years of their construction its new houses will be a slum whose notoriety persists for a century and a half, into the eras of public housing, gang culture and the anxious socio-political footage of Shane Meadows's 2008 film *Somers Town*.

Children like Mary Godwin, who grow up on estates that are still being built out of the surrounding countryside, have a special sense of how precarious that habitation is. They see how society is a matter of invention. Often it's only one house deep, sometimes a matter of weeks old. The finished streets on which they and their friends live resemble suburbs yet seem little more than stage sets when they give way abruptly to farms and fields. But at the pre-dawn of the nineteenth century – as in the twenty-first – children of respectable but not wealthy middle-class families cannot play outside, however seductive the environment. Crime rates are high, and the sixty-eight men who make up the Bow Street Runners are the only professional policing force anywhere in London. Beyond the little glow cast by house lights, the roads are unlit; even darker is the dangerous, unvisited land beyond 'each charter'd street'. William Blake's dystopian vision, in his poem 'London', of a city full of 'hapless

Soldiers' and 'youthful Harlots' dates from just three years before the night of Mary's birth.

The problem of playing outside has not yet arisen in the Godwin house. Until today there has been only one child, three-year-old Fanny, living at 29 the Polygon. It is a grand house, with 'iron balconies […] two marble mantelpieces at least […] and the remainder of Portland Stone […] wood dados and mouldings and double deal six-panelled doors to the two principal storeys', according to the architect's contract. Fanny's small person makes little impression on it. It seems she's already becoming that well-behaved elder child whose stepfather will later describe her as being 'of a quiet, modest, unshowy disposition'. Besides, outdoor activity of any kind is difficult in the rain, and it's been a wet summer. We can imagine what a combination of rain, clay soil and the perpetual building site of the surrounding developments have done to domestic order. To make matters worse, there are as yet no default routines in what is a house of newly-weds. The couple who live here have only been married since March, and the husband arranged the bargain lease only on the eve of their wedding.

Still, they must have known about the mud in advance, since both were already living in the area. William's kept lodgings round the corner in Chalton Street since 1793. This relationship developed after Mary moved down from Pentonville in July 1796 to live nearby. Like other people's money, other people's partnerships work in ways that only their protagonists understand. But these protagonists are both writers, and their compulsion to record means that we know a great deal more than we might expect or want about their private lives. We know, for example, that the affair between Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin was first consummated on a Sunday evening, 21 August 1796, almost exactly a year before Mary's birth, when Godwin wrote in his diary 'chez moi, toute'.

So Mary Godwin's story starts in what a century later the actor Mrs Patrick Campbell will call the 'hurly-burly of the chaise longue'. Although her parents will marry by the time she's born, the scene on 30 August 1797 is in no sense a Christian nativity.

The baby's father, one of the leading atheists of the day, will have a free

hand in her upbringing. Besides, this is an era before Queen Victoria, her German prince and the domestic pieties they will import. In the world this baby is born into, even carols that are today's Christmas clichés – 'Away in a Manger', 'Once in Royal David's City', 'It Came Upon a Midnight Clear' – have yet to be written. It's a time before nostalgia, before *The Old Curiosity Shop* and teddy bears. An era of progress, of science and of reason – even of revolution. It is the moment before kitsch revives the fortunes of the British monarchy; the instant when Britain comes nearest to creating its own Second Republic.

Baby Mary's parents are part of this radical moment. In Revolutionary France Mary Wollstonecraft had the affair, with an American adventurer called Gilbert Imlay, that resulted in her first child, Fanny. Abandoned by Imlay, Wollstonecraft has returned to Britain and, to support herself and Fanny, resumed her writing career. After starting the affair with Godwin she has quickly fallen pregnant. Despite her earlier statement, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that 'the divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings may […] be contested', the couple marry when she is four months gone. After all, this is an era when illegitimate children, if abandoned, face a lifetime of social exclusion – should they even reach adulthood. (The life expectancy of foundlings in institutions is very low.)

It seems astonishing that Mary Wollstonecraft is able to trust another lover at all, especially so soon after Imlay. Does she know in her bones that this time Godwin is what W. H. Auden calls 'the more loving one'? Or does she simply feel that he's a very different bet from the American: a bookish, indoor man, not rogue material? Finally – a question that will arise again and again in the course of this story – don't any of these protagonists at least *try* for some form of birth control? William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft are two of the most politically, socially and intellectually sophisticated people in London, and, by extension, among the most sophisticated in the Europe of their day. They are politically radical, socially nonconformist, not 'family values' conservatives. Sex matters to them: certainly to Godwin, who keeps a slightly creepy diary record involving em dashes. Sponges and condoms, which are called 'gloves', have long been available to people in the know and with a little disposable income: just such people as Godwin and Wollstonecraft. Both are discussed, for

example, in Thomas Stretzer's *A New Description of Merryland Containing a Topographical, Geographical and Natural History of That Country*, the Dr Alex Comfort of its day, which had entered a fourth edition back in 1741. Of course, contraception is always inexact. But Godwin is forty, and Mary by now not a super-fertile teenager but a thirty-eight-year-old mother, and they surely have to try a *little* to have an 'accident'.

Or do they *want* a child: quickly, before it's too late? After all they are a progressive household, now occupying a home built with an eye to the future. Out beyond the smallpox hospital on Bachelors Row and the Pancras Place turnpike, the Polygon must be a striking development among the district's brickfields and market gardens. It's a bumpy ring, built high and sixteen-sided: 'The Hexadecagon' presumably considered too much of a mouthful for commercial reality even by the impractical Jacob Leroux. There are to be thirty-two houses, arranged in pairs joined by stepped porches that builders would probably now call link-attached. Within the ring thirty-two cake slices of garden are proposed.

The great residential doughnut is still incomplete on this night in 1797, and it will remain that way. Still, feeling nature break in around them, the householders of this utopian development play at country living, taking walks in the fields and maintaining gardens, as a hundred and fifty years later their successors will play at cottages in the hygienic half-timbering of Metroland a few miles further north again, on the ever-encroaching outer rim of London. And it *is* play. The Polygon is an urban, not a rural, phenomenon, tuned to the busy city of coffee shops, publishers and booksellers that is visible – and must be audible – just across the fields. Society is being urgently questioned there right now: this is the era of thinkers as energetic and disparate as Jeremy Bentham and, dead less than two months, Edmund Burke. Number 29 has its own library of serious, radical books, while for further intellectual stimulation the British Museum, open to the public since 1759, is just a country stroll away by footpath or down Duke of Bedford Road.

On the whole, social revolutionaries like William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft believe more, not less, than other people that where and when a child is born affects his or her life chances so materially as almost to define it. This logic extends to maternal health. There have always been

large numbers of maternal orphans, whose mothers die during or because of their birth. In England between 1750 and 1800 an average of 7.5 live births per thousand result in maternal mortality; in London, with its overcrowding and poverty, the figures are worse. Although by the 1790s London has managed to get its death rate down closer to the national average, the reduction can hardly be much consolation for women facing childbirth. Even at the new rates, your risk of death from pregnancy may be less than one in a thousand on each occasion, but for two pregnancies it still becomes greater than 1 per cent and so on. These are scary odds. Among other things, they transform marriage and sex from romantic entertainment into the most dangerous undertakings of a woman's life.

Is this why Mary Wollstonecraft refuses to have a doctor in attendance for her second delivery, relying instead on a midwife? Faced with such odds, do you find ways to diminish the risk in your own mind, to believe that 'it won't happen to me'? Her first labour, with Fanny, was relatively easy: certainly it lasted fewer than the sixteen hours it will take to deliver her second child. Perhaps she uses this experience as a touchstone to help her through anticipation of the delivery. 'She was so far from being under any apprehension as to the difficulties of child-birth, as frequently to ridicule the fashion of ladies in England, who keep their chamber for one full month after delivery', Godwin reports. She has had a healthy pregnancy, after all, with plenty of walks (when it isn't raining) through the surrounding fields, to Sadler's Wells, to the bookshops on Ludgate Hill or on to Lamb's Conduit Fields. She is at the height of her personal and intellectual powers and – a near-inconceivable feat for a woman – a well-known writer. She has found love when she might never have expected to again, and at what may seem to her a great age for doing so. She has managed to secure the future of both her first daughter and this new baby through marriage. Above all, she has seen and survived the Reign of Terror that grew out of the French Revolution in 1793–4. Indeed, she gave birth the first time, in Le Havre on 14 May 1794, during the Terror and while her own country was at war with France. She must be feeling pretty invincible.

What *is* Mary Wollstonecraft's relationship with danger? Does it simply not enter her calculations? Does she think, as so many women