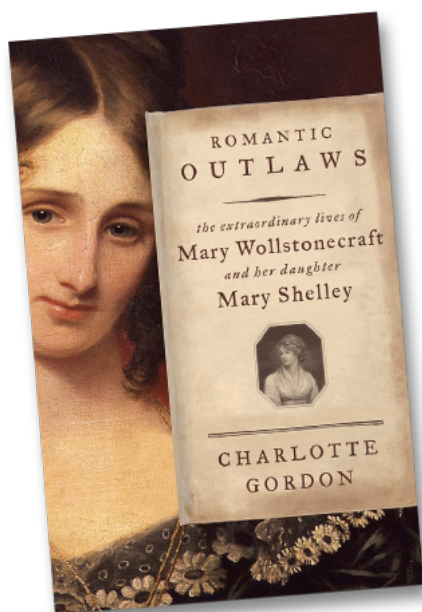


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Ten years ago, I did not know that the famous political philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft was Mary Shelley's mother, or that Wollstonecraft died ten days after giving birth to Shelley. In fact, I barely knew anything about either Wollstonecraft or Shelley. I respected their work, but had never studied either of them very closely. I only discovered their relationship because I had assigned excerpts from Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Shelley's *Frankenstein* to a class I was teaching on women and literature. Taken aback by my own ignorance, I undertook a compensatory campaign of research, reading their biographies and writings. Soon, I realized that despite Wollstonecraft's premature death, her impact on her daughter was profound. Shelley read and reread her mother's books, seeking to live according to Wollstonecraft's principles. Her mother's example sparked her determination to be someone and to create a masterpiece in her own right.



Charlotte at the Villa Diodati, Byron's house in Geneva, where the idea for Frankenstein was born.

My imagination was captured. Brave, passionate, and visionary, these two women broke almost every rule there was to break.

They had children out of wedlock. They fought against the stranglehold of polite society, and sought to balance their need for love and companionship with their need for independence. They braved the criticism of their peers to write works that took on the most volatile issues of the day. They fought against the injustices women faced and in doing so revolutionized history.

Their achievements are all the more remarkable as they lived during a time when women were considered weak and irrational, and were taught to submit to their brothers, fathers, and husbands. Wives could not own property. Except in very rare circumstances, they could not initiate divorce. Children were the father's property. The law gave husbands the right to beat and rape their wives. In fact, men were encouraged to keep women in check, punishing any behavior they regarded as unruly. Not surprisingly, in such a climate, critics derided the work of both mother and daughter. Their contemporaries ridiculed and abused them, calling them whores and worse. Even their own families rejected them.



Charlotte gazing out at bay where Percy Shelley died.

Writing can be a lonely business, often, a thankless one — a commonplace, but nevertheless still true. My specialty is women's history, or, more accurately, history seen through women's eyes. I have a loyal readership, but let's face it, presidents, kings, and generals dominate the literary marketplace. Literary women, no matter how extraordinary, do not usually attract much attention. Sometimes, I accept this, but when it comes to Wollstonecraft and Shelley my ire gets up, as well as a certain proselytizing impulse. Wollstonecraft and Shelley have important lessons to teach us. How can we not have heard of them? How could I have been

so uninformed about their lives? Somehow, after years of elite education, I had managed to escape having any real knowledge of either woman. I could recite Beowulf in the original Anglo Saxon and parse Keats' sonnets, but I was not trained to value the works of Wollstonecraft or her daughter.

Today, I am struck by what a loss this was. Over the last decade, I have been supported by their company, the words and the strength of both women. Their sufferings have made my uncertainties seem small. They weathered poverty, hatred, loneliness, and exile, as well as the slights of everyday life — the insults and gossip, the silences and turned backs — in order to write words they were not supposed to write and live lives they were not supposed to live. Sometimes I wonder what I would have been like if I had learned about Wollstonecraft and Shelley earlier, say in high school or college. Would I have been braver? Would I have been better able to break rules that should have been broken? I take heart from imagining a young reader encountering this book, meeting these two extraordinary women for the first time. The story of Wollstonecraft and Shelley is inspirational. Who knows what might happen if they became the household names they deserve to be?



Charlotte in Italy researching the Shelleys.