

## December 2011

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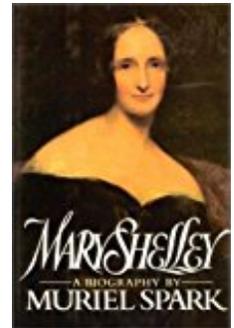
### The Bombshell

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#### Dopplegängers: Mary Shelley and Muriel Spark

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Mary Shelley died on February 1, 1851. On February 1, 1918, Muriel Spark was born. The two writers shared the same initials. Their last names, under which they wrote, were assumed from husbands. Both wound up single mothers of an only son and both suffered chronic financial worries. These coincidences, for someone with Muriel Spark's mystical temperament, are definitive. *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* published in 1951 was Muriel Spark's first book (revised and retitled *Mary Shelley: A Biography* in 1987). It is an extraordinary portrayal of the world-renowned but much neglected early 19th century novelist, daughter of pioneering intellectuals Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and wife of the Romantic poet Percy B. Shelley. *Child of Light* would not be part of the Spark oeuvre, however, if there weren't at least one slightly sinister subtext of equal fascination: within the biography's pages Spark is busily and efficiently creating, Frankenstein-like, an identity for herself as a novelist.



In her 1987 introduction, Spark reveals that at the time she was writing *Child of Light* she envisioned for herself a career as critic and poet having no plans whatsoever to become a novelist, though “now I do practically nothing else but write novels.” *Child of Light* is delightfully strange, intense, reverberant, brief, superior, searching, and a harbinger of Spark's future novels. While recounting Mary Shelley's tempestuous saga, Spark ponders the pleasures and pitfalls of her predecessor's literary life, scrutinizing her mentor's finely crafted tools of the trade. As a magnificent portrait of a woman and artist in the 19th century emerges, we watch rise out of Mary Shelley's ashes the creator of Fleur Talbot who joyfully, but not without irony, declares in *Loitering with Intent*: “How wonderful to be an artist and a woman in the twentieth century.”

P.B. Shelley, son of a wealthy Sussex landowner, was a rebel, dreamer, genius, and declared atheist. An admirer of Mary's father, Shelley visited the political radical and novelist at his London home where such luminaries as William Hazlitt, Charles and Mary Lamb, and Samuel Coleridge were regulars. Godwin, particularly fond of his daughter Mary, purposefully included

her in his circle's nightly political and literary discussions. Mary poured over her mother's writings, especially her novel *Mary*, and did her utmost to match her intellectual rigor. It was in this context that Shelley and Mary fell in love. He was twenty-two, she sixteen. The poet, however, was already married with a young daughter and his wife newly pregnant. Such was the force of Shelley and Mary's passion, both physical and cerebral, they fled in the night for the continent, accompanied by Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont. Godwin would never forgive Shelley. Shelley's father, Sir Timothy, would never forgive Mary.

Over the next two years, Mary became pregnant and lost the baby; Shelley's wife Harriet gave birth to a son and committed suicide shortly thereafter. Shelley and Mary married, hoping to gain custody of his children, but Harriet's family prevailed in the courts and Shelley was denied all access to them. No money was forthcoming from Shelley's father, forcing Shelley, Mary, and Claire to live a hand-to-mouth existence.

Claire Clairmont, an eccentric, ambitious, histrionic woman of striking pre-Raphaelite beauty, might easily be found gliding and tripping through a Spark novel. "There is a type of person who," writes Spark, "having glimpsed the glories attendant upon the life dedicated to creative achievement, and who is yet unqualified to create, pursues in a vague sort of way not the achievement itself but its accoutrements. Such a person was Claire Clairmont."

Claire, the subject of [a biography](#) by Robert Gittings and Jo Manton, was the inspiration for Henry James's novella *The Aspern Papers* which further inspired Emma Tennant's intriguing *Felony*. Claire was best known for her stormy love affair with Lord Byron which resulted in the birth of a daughter, Allegra. Claire was an integral part of the Shelley menage, a confidante and companion to both Percy and Mary. Without Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* might perhaps never have been written.

Claire, already romantically involved with Byron, introduced him to the Shelleys in Geneva in 1816. The friendship between Byron and Percy was instant and intimate. Byron, however, had little regard for Mary. Though she much admired him, "She could not find it in her to conform to his conceptions either of the witty, declassed and emancipated female, nor of the clinging, sweet and acquiescent woman, for she was neither of these." After an evening of discussion flitting between the favored subjects of the supernatural and the scientific enterprise, Byron commanded the assembled group, "We will each write a ghost story." Mary rose to the challenge producing the outline for her triumphant *Frankenstein*.

Mary and Shelley finally settled in Italy near Livorno. The following four years brought relentless tragedies. Their next two children both died in childhood. Allegra contracted typhoid in the convent where she had been sent by Byron and perished. Mary's half-sister Fanny Imlay committed suicide. The culmination was Shelley's drowning in 1822 after his boat capsized during a storm in the Bay of La Spezia. With her fourth and last living child, Percy Florence, Mary returned to London, and lived out her life as best she could devoting herself to her son and to her writing.

The final section of *Child of Light* is dedicated to a critical consideration of Mary Shelley's

literary output, especially her novels *Frankenstien*, *The Last Man*, and *Perkin Warbeck*. Spark pointedly notes Mary Shelley's ability to write across fictional genres, her plain style that encompasses realism and fantasy. She is especially drawn to Mary's themes of doppelgänger, the hunter and the hunted, evil as the absence of good, and the murky thrill of moral ambiguity. Mary Shelley yokes together scientific rationalism and boundless imagination while exploring class divisions, disparity of wealth, and ethical compromise. Spark credits her with "the first of a new and hybrid fictional species," that will prefigure the work of Yeats, H.G. Wells, Camus, the French Symbolists, Rilke, and T.S. Eliot. As Martin Stannard points out in his excellent biography of Spark, Mary Shelley was "the originator of a kind of female Gothic surrealism of which Muriel herself was to become the high priestess." Eleven years after the publication of *Child of Light*, speaking about her fiction in an interview in the *New York Herald Tribune*, Spark said: "My aim is to present the supernatural as a part of a natural history." Precisely what she had deemed Mary Shelley's great achievement.

Spark describes Mary Shelley's literary strengths in terms applicable to her own as yet unwritten body of work. Of Shelley's characterization she comments: "Concerning people, she did not ask the question, in what way is this person distinct from all others? But instead she asked, what is the nature of his resemblance to certain others? In fact, she was more interested in the type than in the individual, and if she did not attempt to depict the latter, her study of types of humanity is varied and sound."

Spark quotes a particularly successful passage from Shelley's historical novel *Perkin Warbeck* praising its subtle use of incongruity: "Here Mary Shelley miraculously escapes sentimentality by a hair-breadth, and this is a thing we can nearly always discover the genuine artist doing. Had she solemnized the note in the slightest degree... the scene would have been ruined."

In the considerable works about P.B. Shelley, Mary's own accomplishments are virtually unmentioned aside from the occasional nod to what is deemed her fluke-of-a-success-horror-story *Frankenstein*. Muriel Spark's *Child of Light*, though under-read, stunningly redresses the oversight.

In writing about *The Last Man*, an apocalyptic, prescient tale of mankind's devastation by plague and society's destructive unraveling, Spark wrote of Mary Shelley: "Ultimately, we must return to the fact, that it is from her own experience of solitude, from the personal landscape of devastation she felt around her, that her wonderful story draws life." Spark was, of course, also describing her future self.

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