**‘On This Day in 1816’: The Bicentenary of *Frankenstein*’s Composition**

*A public reading of Romantic poetry and prose to be held at the Keats-Shelley House, Rome, on Saturday 23rd July 2016 (start time: 18:30).*

In May 1816, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Godwin and Claire Clairmont moved to Geneva where they would live near Lord Byron and his physician-companion, Dr John William Polidori. Over the next few weeks, this group of young intellectuals spent almost all their time together, sailing on Lake Geneva by day and reading and conversing in the evenings. One night in late May or early June, a ghost-story writing competition began. Inspired by this, the 18-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Mary Shelley) conceived what is now one of the most iconic tales in English literature. *Frankenstein* was published anonymously nineteen months later.

On the wet afternoon of 24 July 1816, Mary notes in her journal, ‘write my story’: this is her first reference to the composition of *Frankenstein*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Percy Shelley was also writing his poem ‘Mont Blanc’ on this day.[[2]](#footnote-2) Both authors were inspired by their visits to Chamonix and the Mer De Glace, subjects of awe for many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers. These shared experiences and subsequent discussions resulted in descriptions of the landscape in individual journal entries and letters that are strikingly similar. For example, the immensity of the mountains produce a similar image of alienation: ‘The summits of the highest were hid in Clouds but they sometimes peeped out into the blue sky higher one would think than the safety of God would permit’ (Mary);[[3]](#footnote-3) ‘They pierce the clouds like things not belonging to this earth’ (Percy).[[4]](#footnote-4) Even scenes that lack grandeur still induce feelings of admiration: ‘there is som[e]thing so divine in all this scenery that you love & admire it even where its features are less magnificent than usual’ (Mary);[[5]](#footnote-5) ‘there is a grandeur in the very shapes and colours which could not fail to impress, even on a smaller scale’ (Percy).[[6]](#footnote-6) These shared impressions would become the basis for ‘Mont Blanc’ and also the pivotal scene in *Frankenstein* in which Victor encounters his creation for the first time since his ‘birth’.

This event at the Keats-Shelley House in 2016 celebrates the bicentenary of the composition of the Romantic period’s most famous novel, and this fruitful period of creativity for both Shelleys in 1816. The event will take place almost exactly 200 years later to the day that Mary Shelley began writing. The evening will include a reading of the preface and the introduction to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein,* the most famous scene in the novel when the creature awakens (‘It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils’),[[7]](#footnote-7) and excerpts from Percy Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’. Two scholars (Anna Mercer and David Higgins) will give short talks on the Shelleys’ collaborative literary relationship, and 1816 as ‘the Year Without a Summer’.

The event is a public ticketed event and refreshments will be provided. To buy tickets (at €10 each) please email <info@ksh.roma.it>. We hope to produce an invigorating atmosphere that will allow attendees to consider the history of *Frankenstein* during this exciting bicentenary month. The event has been supported by the British Association for Romantic Studies (BARS), the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies (BSECS), the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies at the University of York, and the Keats-Shelley House. We also hope to include a student’s report from Rome in an edition of the *Keats-Shelley Review*.

**The talk by Anna Mercer** is based on her research as a PhD candidate at the University of York. Her thesis considers the Shelleys’ collaborative literary relationship and seeks to provide an unprejudiced study of both authors and their influence on each other. *Frankenstein* is now understood as a crucial example of collaborative writing from the Romantic period, as Percy Shelley edited Mary’s manuscript. Percy’s alterations and corrections were not an imposing corruption of his wife’s writing; instead, the way the Shelleys worked together in 1816 can be understood and analysed as an example of reciprocal creativity. As Neil Fraistat observed at the launch of the Shelley-Godwin archive in 2013, *Frankenstein* was part of ‘a two-way collaboration […] this wasn’t just about him supervising her’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Charles E. Robinson has identified the possibility of the Shelleys ‘at work on the [*Frankenstein*] Notebooks at the same time, possibly sitting side by side and using the same pen and ink to draft the novel and at the same time to enter corrections’.[[9]](#footnote-9) This event presents to the public a reading of the work of both authors, including the preface and the introduction to the novel: the former written by Percy and published in 1818, and the latter written retrospectively in 1831 by Mary. These extracts provide the notorious details of the Shelleys’ experiences in Geneva in 1816 that stirred Mary Shelley to give life to her ‘hideous progeny’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Anna Mercer’s talk invites readers to learn more about the history of the novel’s author(s) and their other writings.

**David Higgins’s talk** will draw on his research on Romantic writing and environmental catastrophe. Cultural historians have recently explored how the eruption of the Indonesian volcano Mount Tambora in 1815 caused severe disruption to the global climate and, in particular, the ‘Year Without A Summer’ of 1816 (e.g. Wood 2014).[[11]](#footnote-11) However, what has not been properly investigated is the extent to which Byron, Mary Shelley, and Percy Shelley were responding *as a creative community* to the unusual environmental conditions. The grim summer of 1816 heightened their apprehension of the sublimity of the Alpine landscape and led them to contemplate the frightening power of the natural world. This talk will bring together ‘Mont Blanc’, *Frankenstein*, *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, and ‘Darkness’ to examine the shared ways in which they address the problem of dwelling with environmental catastrophe.

**Event Team:**

* Anna Mercer, University of York (speaker and main organiser)
* David Higgins, University of Leeds (speaker and co-organiser)
* Lucy Hodgetts and Duncan Robertson, University of York (readers and co-organisers)

**Anna Mercer** is an AHRC-funded PhD candidate at the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies and the Department of English and Related Literature, University of York. She has also studied at the University of Liverpool and Jesus College, University of Cambridge. Her research explores the literary collaboration of Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley, focusing on the textual connections between their works. Anna is also interested in literary relationships of the Romantic period more generally, and has published on the poetical dialogue of S. T. Coleridge and Sara Coleridge. She is a blogger for BARS and *The Wordsworth Trust*.

1. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (eds), *The Journals of Mary Shelley* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) p. 118 (24 July 1816). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Shelley, *Journals*, p. 118, n. 3 (24 July 1816). See also Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (eds) *The Poems of Shelley*, Volume One, 1804-1817 (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 532-533. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. MWS, *Journals*, p. 114(22 July 1816). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Frederick L. Jones (ed.), *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), vol. 1, p. 500 (25 July 1816). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. MWS, *Journals*, p. 114 (22 July 1816). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. PBS, *Letters*,vol. 1, p. 494 (22 July 1816). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. MWS, *Frankenstein* in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Nora Crook with Pamela Clemit, 8 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996), vol. 1, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *New York Times Online*, ‘*Frankenstein* Manuscript Comes Alive in Online Shelley Archive’ <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/30/frankenstein-manuscript-comes-alive-in-online-shelley-archive/?\_r=3> [accessed: 6 November 2013]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Charles E. Robinson, ‘Introduction’, *The Frankenstein Notebooks*, 2 vols (London: Garland, 1996), vol. 1, p. lxx. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. MWS, ‘Introduction’ to the 1831 *Frankenstein*,in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, vol. 1, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gillen D’Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption that Changed the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)