



Death and the Maidens: Fanny Wollstonecraft and the Shelley circle

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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