

Horrid Mysteries of Cl Cl 26: A Tale of Mothers and Daughters

Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger

Because the past had ghosts, I people the present and the
future with the same limbless shadowy race.¹

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.²

In 1998 the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, part of the New York Public Library, bought what Sotheby's described as 'some thousands of pages in a box', the working papers of Harry Buxton Forman (1842–1917), an editor of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, book and manuscript collector, and forger of spurious first editions of beloved English poets.³ After his death they went to his son Maurice Buxton Forman, a South African émigré; after Maurice's death they went in turn to a friend of his named Ernest Pereira, and thence to Sotheby's.

Among them were hundreds of pages in the hand of Clara Mary Jane Clairmont (1798–1879), known as Claire, remembered today as the companion of Mary Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley on their elopement to Europe in July 1814, as the lover of Byron, and mother of his daughter Allegra. Ten years before her death, Clairmont recommenced a correspondence with Edward John Trelawny, not only Byron and Shelley's friend but also a long-time admirer of hers who had once proposed to her. Their correspondence between 1822 and 1868 was intermittent, but in late 1869 they took it up again with energy. Trelawny, who had published *The Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (1858), asked Clairmont for her memories of Shelley and, later, for copies of Shelley's letters to her. Clairmont responded with appreciation and much-needed corrections of Trelawny's memoir, keeping rough

¹ Claire Clairmont to Jane Williams Hogg, February 1830, in *The Clairmont Correspondence: Letters of Claire Clairmont, Charles Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay Godwin*, ed. by Marion Kingston Stocking, 2 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 1: 1808–1834, 263. References to letters from this edition will be given parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

² W. B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916', in *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, ed. by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 312.

³ Quoted in Stephen Wagner's Annual Report of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, 1997–1998, p. 1.

drafts and copies for herself, amounting to 159 pages altogether. These are now catalogued as Cl Cl 26: that is, the twenty-sixth manuscript of Claire Clairmont's acquired by the Pforzheimer Collection (Fig. 1).

It is difficult to describe the confusion this collection can inspire. Almost everything is copied at least twice. Subjects skip from one to another, and topics embarked on promisingly come to little. It is here that a brief 'memoir of Lord Byron' is to be found, in which Byron is described as becoming, 'under the influence of free love', 'a human tyger slaking his thirst for inflicting pain, upon defenceless women who had loved him'.⁴ If

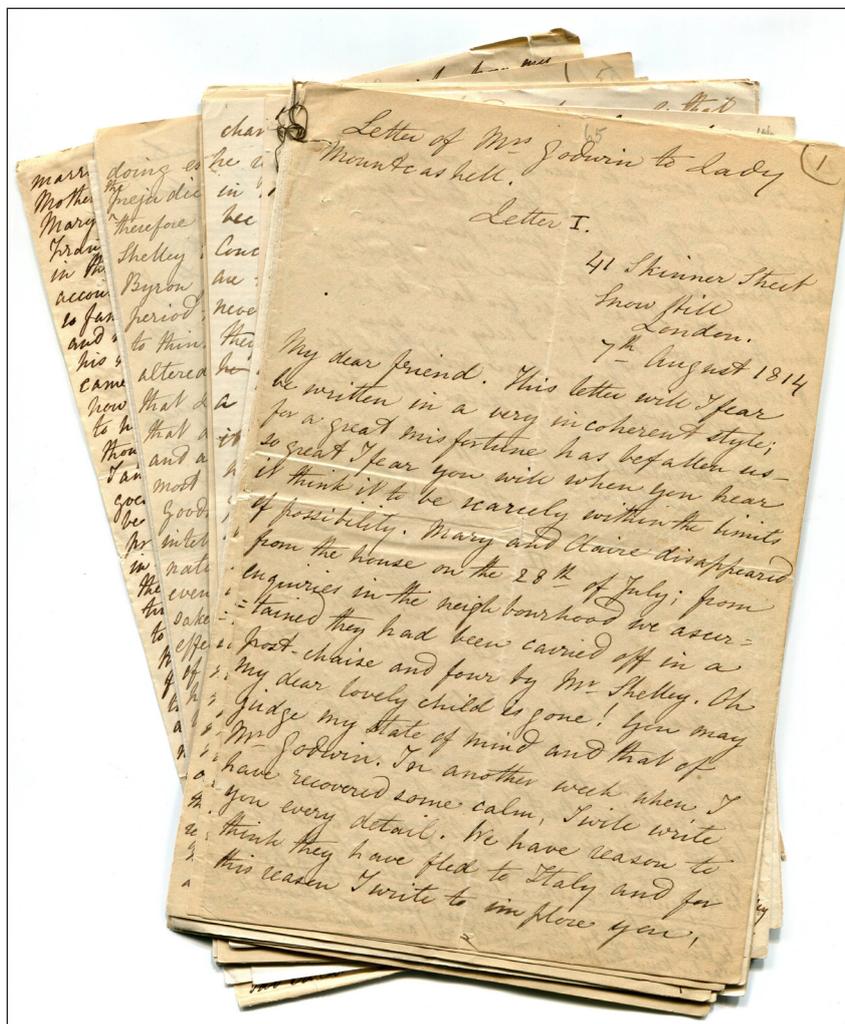


Fig. 1: Cl Cl 26 in bulk. Author's own photograph.

⁴ New York, The New York Public Library, Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, Cl Cl 26, p. 142.

the memoir were longer than its few hundred words, it would be genuinely important, but it is no more than the draft of a prefatory note. It stands, however, as a juicy synecdoche of the whole collection, in being written decades after the events it does not describe, in its deep distortions — ‘free love’ was not a popular idiom in the 1810s or 1820s, and Clairmont’s version of Byron’s and Shelley’s views of sexuality is simplistic to the point of parody — and finally, in that it is devoted to tearing down Byron and defending herself and her dead Allegra.

The largest component of Cl Cl 26 is what Clairmont calls copies of six letters from her mother, Mary Jane Godwin, to their mutual friend, Margaret King Moore, Lady Mount Cashell, who had been Mary Wollstonecraft’s pupil as a girl and as a young woman contracted a miserable marriage with the Earl of Mount Cashell. After she left her husband and moved to Italy with George Tighe, she adopted the name of the governess heroine of Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life*, Mrs Mason (Fig. 2). Dated between 7 August 1814 and 28 July 1815, with one undated

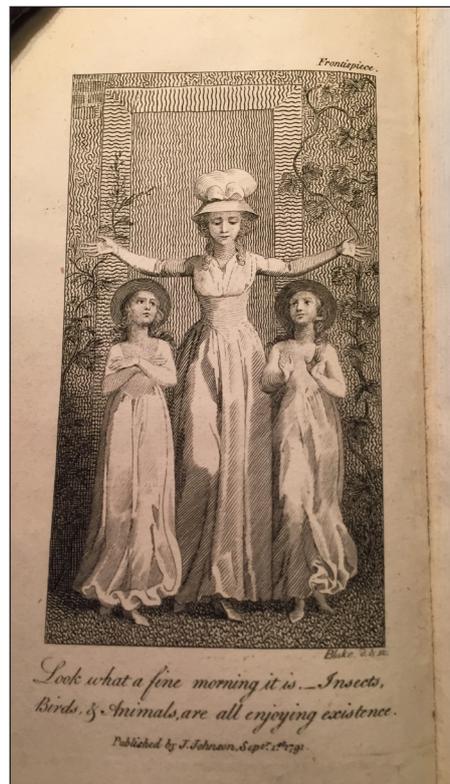


Fig. 2: Frontispiece, Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life*, 2nd edn (London: Johnson, 1791), showing Mrs Mason and her charges. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

fragment that precedes the rest, these letters are the horrid mystery of Cl Cl 26, and their actors are members of the 'limbless shadowy race' who had died long before — the Shelleys, Claire Clairmont's younger self, and almost all the others. Clairmont claimed to have received the originals from Lady Mount Cashell during a visit to Pisa in 1832, but no originals have ever turned up. The letters narrate in detail, from Mary Jane Godwin's point of view, the 1814 elopement and its aftermath. They are drafted and copied fair, sometimes more than once, and footnoted with explanations for Trelawny (Fig. 3).

Editors from the earliest days have appreciated that these letters contain much that is untrue and that, altogether, they tell a tale of

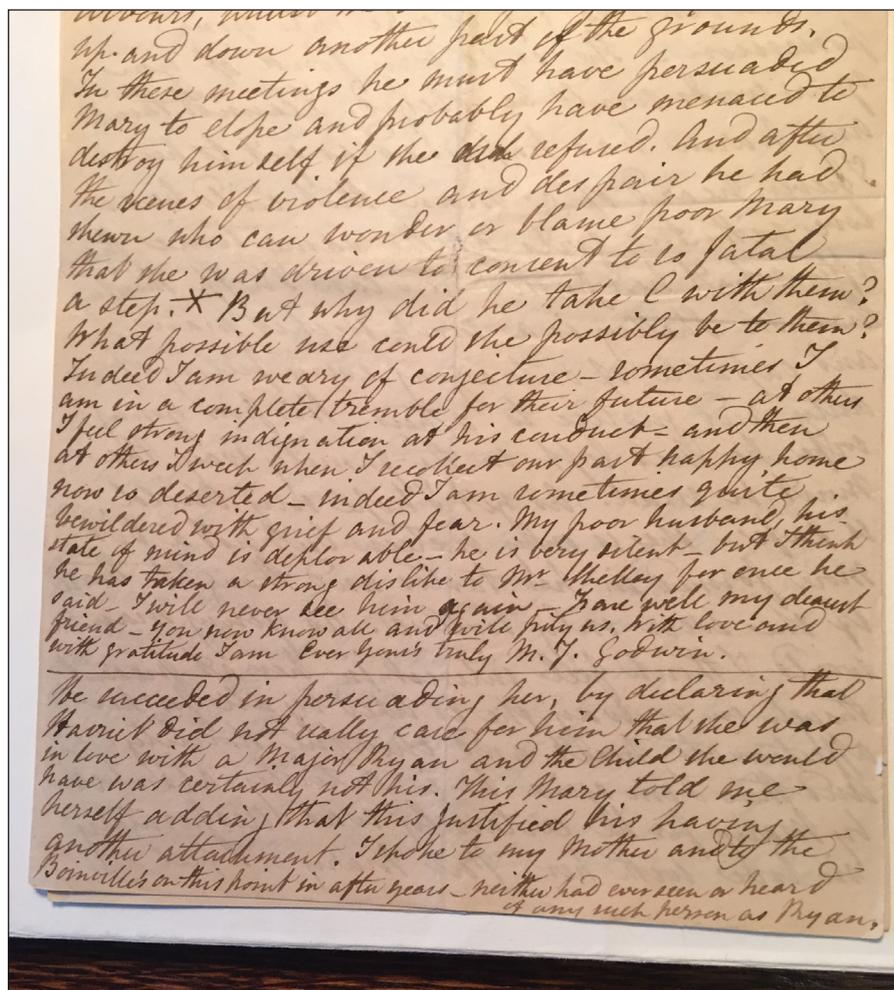


Fig. 3: Detail of letter from Cl Cl 26, showing a footnote which explains how P. B. Shelley inveigled Mary Godwin away from home. Author's own photograph.

special pleading at its most special. And they tell it in a tone that implies acquaintance with the Gothic novel, which we know Clairmont possessed, both from her reading and her own early abortive attempt at a novel that combined horror and Enlightenment satire.⁵ The story told in the letters of treachery, betrayal, and a stolen child hidden in a convent, is entirely consonant with the Gothic mode. But, until recently, editors of these papers have assumed that they really are by their purported author, Mary Jane Godwin. Edward Dowden, describing the bundle in an appendix to his 1886 life of P. B. Shelley, writes that he has not incorporated them into the main body of his work because ‘I was able to convict Mrs. Godwin of deliberate dishonesty in several important matters; and I knew that she wrote under the influence of feelings which would probably lead her into a perversion of the truth’. Mary Jane Godwin had earned a reputation that outlived her of childish bad temper and self-defensive distortion of the facts so that early editors had no trouble believing that she was the author of these unreliable letters. Edward Dowden did notice, however, that Claire Clairmont had taken a creative hand in their presentation:

An earlier and a later copy in Miss Clairmont’s handwriting lie before me. The earlier exhibits certain passages [...] composed or recomposed by Miss Clairmont, the text, as she designed it to stand, emerging from a tangle of cancelled words and phrases, alterations, interlineations. Yet I have little doubt that in many parts it presents with tolerable fidelity what Mrs. Godwin wrote. [...] The evidence leads one to believe that where the transcriber desired to omit or alter any statement [...] or to insert anything, she did not hesitate to do so; but that in general no ground or motive existed for such alteration; so that her transcript may be accepted as representing the original in essentials. Still it is very far from possessing the authority of an original document.⁶

Most later editors have agreed with Dowden that Cl Cl 26 ‘represents the original in essentials’. But what if it *is* the original? What if Clairmont did not just take a hand in rewriting or editing, but is herself their writer? Andrew Stott has suggested this thesis in an unpublished essay.⁷ As the transcriber of the bundle when it arrived at the Pforzheimer Collection,

⁵ See the reading list in *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, ed. by Marion Kingston Stocking (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 502–17. Her reading there includes Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), *Tales of Hoffmann*, Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1778), much from Schiller, and Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

⁶ Edward Dowden, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1886), II, 541.

⁷ ‘Mr. Shelley was a bigot in a number of ways’, delivered at the New York Romantics’ Friendly Society, 26 April 2011.

I had often asked myself the same question. The stops and starts, the revisions, the datings and redatings, are in no way typical of the work of transcription, though they are of composition. And we know that Clairmont was perfectly capable of accurate transcription: her copies of letters from both Shelleys in this packet of manuscripts, for instance, have only a few minor errors, and she spent a considerable amount of her brief time with Byron making fair copies of his work for his publisher. We know, though, that Mary Jane Godwin did carry on a correspondence with Lady Mount Cashell, although none of those letters survive. Why should the ones under consideration not be part of those?⁸ Because their incongruence with the known facts of time and place, and their strangely fictitious flavour militate against this conclusion. For years, my sense of the letters was that they were too credible to be wholly fake, but too fake to be believed.

Despite this sense and despite Stott's forthright suggestion, however, it was not until I started to examine the degree to which the circumstances reported in the letters are false that I was convinced that we ought to look at the letters as Clairmont's own creation, at least hypothetically. The horrid mystery will not be accounted for in full in this article — such a task would be tedious as well as impossible. My plan here, rather, is first to review Claire Clairmont's life to try to understand why, in its evening, she might have impersonated her mother and by proxy her mother's supposed correspondent, Lady Mount Cashell, in writing this version of the decisive events of her youth; and, second, to explore where this, her most fully realized work of fiction, might have come from.

A girl named Clara Mary Jane was born 27 April 1798 to Mary Jane Clairmont, a surname her mother chose for herself. Like her older brother, Charles, she was born out of wedlock, though not to the same father. When her mother was imprisoned for debt for four months in Ilchester in 1799, the infant, then called Jane, came with her.⁹ In 1801, having moved to London, Mary Jane Clairmont met and married William Godwin, who was caring for his four-year-old daughter Mary Godwin and the seven-year-old Fanny Imlay Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter by her liaison with the American Gilbert Imlay. When they married, the family thus composed was indeed 'miscellaneous', as Godwin put it in a letter to his brother.¹⁰ The

⁸ P. B. Shelley writes to Claire Clairmont, 28 May 1822: 'Mrs M[ason] will tell you all the Sk[inner] St[reet] news'; and then, in his only surviving letter to Mary Jane Godwin, written the next day: 'Mrs. Mason has sent me an extract from your last letter to shew to Mary.' *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), II, 427, 428–29.

⁹ Vicki Parslow Stafford, *Claire Clairmont, Mary Jane's Daughter*, <<https://sites.google.com/site/maryjanesdaughter/>> [accessed 14 October 2018].

¹⁰ Letter to Philip Hull Godwin, 21 February 1817, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Abinger Dep c. 523, p. 9' <<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/abinger/images/Dep.c.523-61-1.jpg>> [accessed 14 October 2018].

final child was the only offspring of William and Mary Jane Godwin, a boy named William, born in 1803.

The familiar story of the elopement of Mary Godwin, Claire Clairmont, and Percy Bysshe Shelley in July 1814 will be treated below as it is the substance of the letters. After the three of them returned, Clairmont remained with Shelley and her stepsister off and on in an uncomfortable ménage. In the spring of 1816 she embarked on a pseudonymous correspondence with Byron. She set the emotional pitch high from the start, writing in her first letter:

If a woman whose reputation has yet remained unstained, if without either guardian or husband to control she should throw herself upon your mercy, if with a beating heart she should confess the love she has borne you many years, if she should secure to you secrecy and safety, if she should return your kindness with fond affection and unbounded devotion could you betray her or would you be silent as the grave?¹¹

The first letter was signed ‘E. Trefusis’; the second, ‘G. C. B_____’; the third, ‘Clara Clairmont’. She soon became ‘Clare’, and the first surviving letter in which she signs herself Claire is from 1819. The letters to Byron were effective in that she obtained an audience and a sexual relationship — though Byron, recently separated from his wife, was notoriously easy to seduce. This series of letters, to not one of which Byron ever replied, besides offering the pain of watching an intelligent woman throw herself away on a fantasy, tell us that Clairmont had a strong imagination and was capable of a disguised correspondence. Later that spring, she persuaded Shelley to follow Byron to Geneva, rather than going to Italy as they had planned.

After the summer of 1816, during which Claire Clairmont made fair copies of ‘Darkness’ and Canto 3 of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, had lots of sex with Byron, and failed to complete an entry for the famous ghost story contest, she returned to England with the Shelleys (as they were soon to become) and gave birth in January 1817.¹² She called the child Alba, after its father whom the summer party had nicknamed Albé (a play on LB, Lord Byron). After a series of adjustments — such as Clairmont’s own name, and her mother’s, had undergone — the child, at Byron’s wish, was called Allegra. Clairmont gave her up to Byron’s care in April 1818, soon after she

¹¹ Claire Clairmont, letter to Byron, [March or April 1816(?)], *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1, 25. Here and elsewhere I have expanded ampersands to the word ‘and’. Original spellings, e.g. ‘secreisy’, have been retained.

¹² Soon after Allegra’s birth, Byron wrote to his friend Douglas Kinnaird that ‘The next question is is the brat *mine*? I have reason to think so — for I know as much as one can know such a thing — that she had *not lived* with S[helley] during the time of our acquaintance — and that she had a good deal of that same with me.’ *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols (London: Murray, 1973–82), v: ‘So late into the night’: 1816–1817 (1976), p. 162.

and the Shelleys and their children had arrived in Italy. She last saw her daughter in the autumn of that year.

Throughout the years 1814 to 1822, Clairmont lived with Percy Bysshe Shelley's financial and emotional support, and spent much of her time in residence with him and Mary Shelley. Her own pain and, after 1818, worry about Allegra were compounded by the Shelleys' own dreadful luck with their four children, only one of whom lived to adulthood. And while the three of them maintained a household, the two stepsisters had a difficult and constantly contentious relationship. In 1820, aided by Lady Mount Cashell, Claire moved to lodgings in Florence. Allegra died of typhus in April 1822, followed that July by Shelley's drowning aged twenty-nine. Claire Clairmont was twenty-four when her life was thus transformed; henceforth she had to make her own way in the world.

To understand the letters she sent to Trelawny in 1869, the less familiar years of Clairmont's life are just as important as her time with the Shelleys. Clairmont embarked on her career with a deep consciousness that she had to conceal her past from the world. She would be working as a teacher or a governess, and for such work a spotless reputation was necessary. She crossed through most mentions of Allegra in her journals, and for the whole of her working career, 1822 to roughly 1841, worried that her association with Shelley or Byron would be discovered. In 1830, for instance, she asked Mary Shelley to use her literary connections in Paris to prevent Clairmont's name being mentioned in a translation of Thomas Moore's life of Byron, writing that 'to any one whose bread depends on the public, a printed exposure of their conduct will infallibly bring on destitution' and, adding maliciously,

I know the subject is a disagreeable one, and that you do not like disagreeable subjects [but] I am reduced to suggest the subject to your attention, with the firm hope that you will find some method of warding off the threatened mischief. (1, 280–81)

Fear and self-censorship in the households where she lived were the first rules she learned as a governess.

Clairmont's life was hard but it was not static; she moved around Russia, Vienna, Dresden, Pisa, Nice, German and Italian spa towns, and, periodically, England. While some of her pupils and their parents were noxious to her, with others she formed bonds of affection that continued after she ceased teaching. Her letters — the chief survivors are those to Mary Shelley, Jane Williams, her brother Charles and his wife, and, in later years, to Trelawny — allowed her to express much on which she had to silence herself before her employers, and they give evidence of subversive tactics. In June 1835, for instance, while living in Pisa and keeping company

with Lady Mount Cashell's adult daughter, Clairmont explained to Mary Shelley how she was forced into helping Laura through a crisis of faith:

I, as a governess have always been obliged to declare that I believe in the Immortality of the Soul, whilst the truth is that the only consolation I have is in the contrary opinion. [...] Laura's friends, knowing how much confidence she has in me, and believing all I have said as a governess, force me to write long persuasions to her on the impossibility of Materialism, and thus am I made to uphold what it would kill me down-right to believe sincerely. (11, 320)

In the same letter she describes her efforts to impart feminist ideas to her students: 'I think I can with certainty affirm that all the pupils I have ever had will be violent defenders of the Rights of Women. I have taken great pains to sow the seeds of that doctrine wherever I could' (11, 323). (It is worth noting that she is writing at a moment when she was giving lessons, not living with her employers; at other times she writes in the expectation that her letters may be read, or sends them in care of recipients whose names will not evoke suspicion.¹³) Clairmont's abilities as a letter writer have been rightly celebrated, in the first instance by Mary Shelley, but her pervasive theme, as she was well aware, was her own unhappiness: 'what Mademoiselle de L'Espinasse was for love I am for pain — all my letters are on the same subject, and yet I hope I do not repeat myself, for truly with such diversity of experience I ought not.'¹⁴

Like Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont lived in expectation of a legacy from P. B. Shelley's will, a powerless document until his father Sir Timothy's death which did not come until he was ninety-two, in 1844 (*Fig. 4*). The long wait galled them, though it provoked Clairmont to humour at times, too: 'I can never think of him', she wrote to Mary Shelley in 1832, 'without seeing his grey hair growing into fine clustering brown locks, his bent form assuming manly straightness and strength, and the most glowing pink creeping over his once aged but now youthful cheek' (1, 288). Clairmont's situation became easier in 1841 when she was able to raise an income on her modest expectations; the legacy, when it finally came, put her in a position to help her brother, his wife, and their seven children. Most of her adult life, though, was spent in enforced silence with little money to spare.

She did not often write of Byron or Allegra, naturally. During a cholera epidemic in Florence, however, when she expected soon to die, she wrote to Mary Shelley:

¹³ See, for example, her letter to Jane Williams from Moscow, December 1826, *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1, 239.

¹⁴ *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1, 292. Stocking identifies Julie Jeanne de l'Espinasse (1732–1776) as a brilliant *salonnière* whose letters, published after her death, 'revealed a life of secret love' (1, 294n).

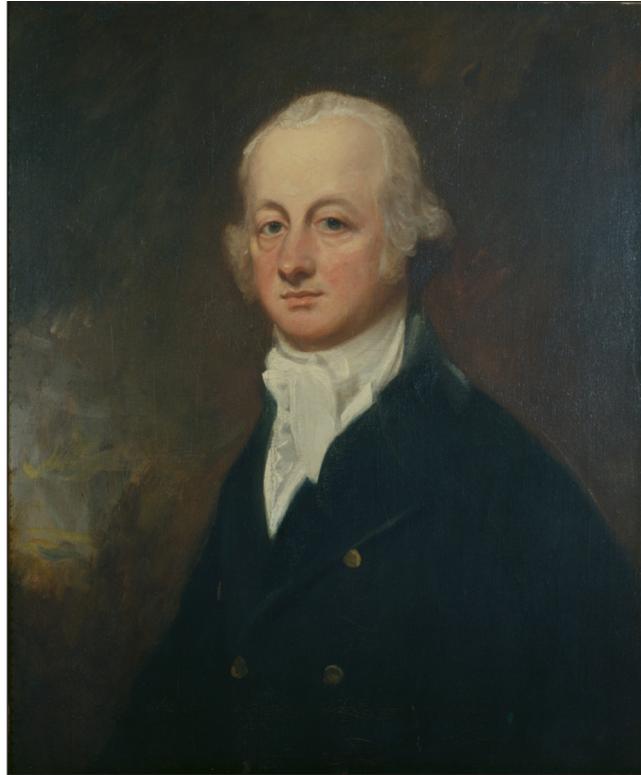


Fig. 4: George Romney, portrait of Sir Timothy Shelley, 1791, oil. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

You might be curious to know, whether in leaving life, my sentiments experience any change in regard to Lord Byron: you might think that as my end approaches, I have softened towards him, and have lost that extreme contempt and obstinate aversion I have so long entertained for him. Not at all. So far from it that were the fairest Paradise offered to me upon the condition of his sharing it, I would refuse it. [...] I am not revengeful and desire pain to no one, but for me there could be no happiness, there could be nothing but misery in the presence of the person who so wantonly willfully destroyed my Allegra. Such were my sentiments since her death — such they will ever be. (II, 327)

Her letters to Trelawny and her late writings that make up the bulk of CI CI 26 show that this was accurate, with the distinction that she did, later, seem to wish pain to Byron's ghost.

Once a runaway and sexual rebel, Clairmont returned to England after William Godwin's death in 1836 with duty as her credo. In 1856 she wrote to her brother's widow, Antonia:

In the Spring of 36 — my Mother lost her husband — I never thought of coming home until then — she was under his care, had his income and his company — but when she lost him, and no Child in England, I saw the necessity of returning — [...] and by November of 36 I was in England — and never left it again till my poor mother died. I think I only behaved as every Child ought to behave to its Mother. (II, 555)

At the time it was her own duty that concerned her; later the virtue became important to her to the point of irrationality. In 1849, when her niece married a friend of Percy Florence and Mary Shelley's without Clairmont's knowledge or permission, her fury (she suspected that the young man had been Mary Shelley's lover) led her to break permanently with the Shelleys, though she did send one last letter to Percy Florence on the death of Mary Shelley, a model of unforgiving anger and cherished malice (II, 536–37).

Before this rupture, these years in and near London, late 1836 to mid-1841, are significant for our understanding of Claire Clairmont's relationship with Mary Jane Godwin. The surviving evidence is thin but suggestive. No letters at all are known to survive from Clairmont to her mother. In previous years, given how often she asks her correspondents to remember her to her mother, or to make excuses to her for not writing, it seems likely that they were not in regular correspondence during much of Clairmont's time abroad. From 1836 to 1841, the letters of Clairmont's that survive — four to Mary Shelley and one to Percy Florence — mention her mother only briefly. In one from April 1838, when Clairmont was teaching in Windsor, she asks Mary Shelley in London if she had seen her mother, adding, 'she writes to me very seldom. I trust she is well' (II, 354).

And yet there was a bond of more than duty between mother and daughter. Clairmont, en route to England in the autumn of 1836, writes to Mary Shelley: 'my love my tenderest love to my Mother [...] take care of yourself — for Heavensake — I won't attempt to describe all I feel — of uneasiness for you for my mother for myself' (II, 347). Mary Jane Godwin's letters from her years at Monte Video Place in Kentish Town, where she moved after her husband's death, mention Claire with affection and pride. In 1839 she writes to the writer and editor Laman Blanchard, kind to her in these years, that during an envisioned visit from him, 'I think too I shall have my daughter, who wishes for the pleasure of knowing you, and may I add, is worthy of the boon.'¹⁵ She had already, late in 1838, urged on him the possibility of publishing Clairmont's work, mentioning 'The Pole', a story that Mary Shelley had finished for Clairmont and placed as her own in a journal:

¹⁵ Mary Jane Godwin, letter to Laman Blanchard, postmarked 5 March 1839, Pforzheimer Collection, MJG II, p. 3.

My dear daughter returned to the country much cheered by what I told her of your sympathy. I hope she is preparing something worthy to be presented to your taste and acumen. I wish you may have looked at 'The Pole.' The inclosed is of her writing [two words struck through — 'and finished' or 'and published']. Mr. G. when engaged upon *Cloudesley*, asked her for a description of a Greek Girl. He transcribed it into his M.S. word for word. She writes with much more ease now. (Fig. 5)¹⁶

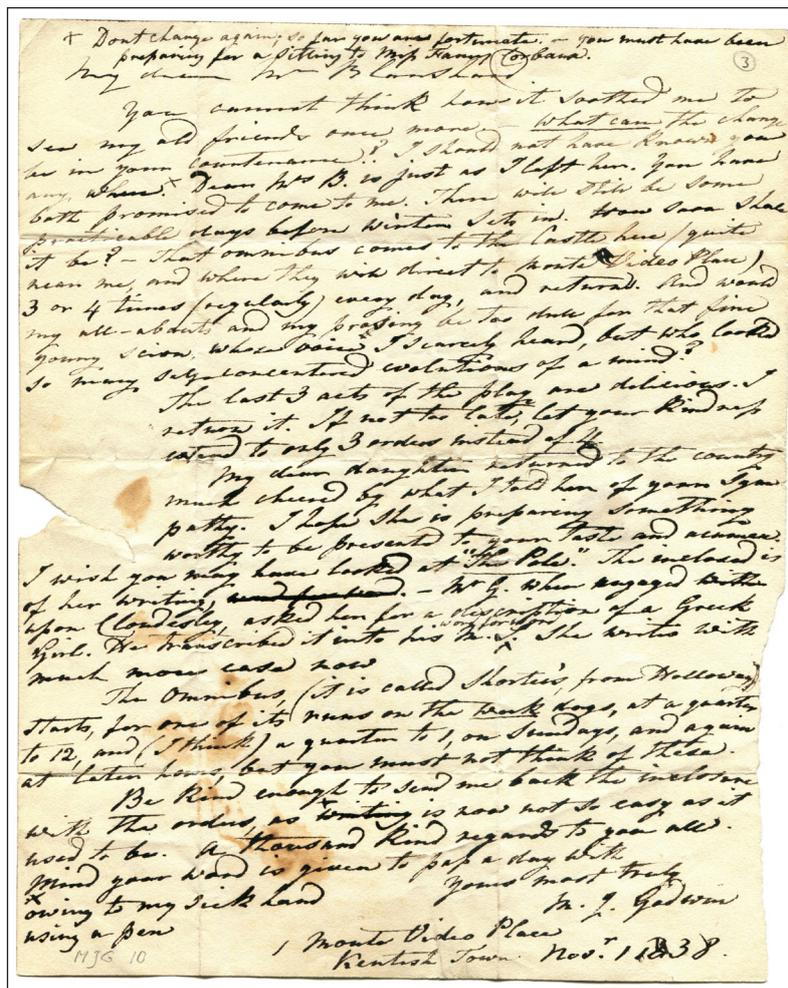


Fig. 5: Detail of letter, Mary Jane Godwin to Laman Blanchard, 1 November 1838. Author's own photograph.

¹⁶ Mary Jane Godwin, letter to Blanchard, 1 November 1838, Pforzheimer Collection, MJG 10, p. 2. Clairmont's contribution to *Cloudesley* is also discussed by Stocking in *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1, 270, 271n.

Nothing seems to have come of this gambit, but it is telling: in 1835 Mary Jane Godwin had asked Blanchard to review *Transfusion*, the only novel by her younger son, William, published after his death in the cholera epidemic of 1832. Now she has a chance again to promote the literary career of her own flesh and blood, and she does not waste it.

But whatever she wrote to Clairmont herself has not survived. In October 1840, having moved from Windsor to lodgings in London, Clairmont says that her mother is worse, but does not elaborate. In the spring of 1841, Mary Shelley mentions to a friend that ‘Mrs. Godwin is quite an invalid’, and that ‘Miss C— is very attentive to her’.¹⁷ Mary Jane Godwin died in June 1841. We know, then, that Claire Clairmont did take care of her mother, and more assiduous care as her mother’s health deteriorated; unfortunately, this is all the information we have. Yet this is the only time in which she and Mary Jane Godwin could have talked over their lives as adults, and if we are to consider seriously the proposition that the letters written in Mary Jane Godwin’s name, dated 1814 and 1815, are the productions of her daughter, *c.* 1869, it is hard not to imagine that they did have conversations on the elopement that so changed the course of their lives. Whether or not those conversations bore any resemblance to the letters of Cl Cl 26 is impossible to say. Children do not always want to know what their parents have gone through in their rearing; parents do not always want to tell them; the reverse is also true.

We know better how Clairmont felt towards the woman to whom the letters are addressed; staying with Lady Mount Cashell (*Fig. 6*), still known as Mrs Mason, in Pisa in 1832, she describes her with an enthusiasm she never evinces for Mary Jane Godwin — although she includes her mother in her encomium:

Nothing can equal Mrs. Mason’s kindness to me. Hers is the only house except my mother’s in which in all my life I have ever felt at home. With her I am as her child — from the merest trifle to the greatest object she treats me as if her happiness depended on mine — then she understands me so completely — I have no need to disguise my sentiments, to barricade myself in silence as I do with almost every body [...]. This ought to be a great happiness to me and would, did not her unhappiness and her precarious state of health, darken it with the torture of fear. It is too bitter after a long life passed in unbroken misery, to find a good only that you may lose it. (1, 290–91)

We have incomplete knowledge of Claire Clairmont’s feelings about these two women. At sixteen she was willing to run off to Europe with Mary and

¹⁷ *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980–88), III: ‘What years I have spent’ (1988), p. 12.



Fig. 6: Unknown artist, portrait of Lady Mount Cashell, c. 1827–29, watercolour. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Shelley, as everyone (including Mary and Shelley) called them, and able — just — to resist a mother who had followed her across the Channel to Calais to bring her home; Shelley wrote in the journal he and Mary Godwin were keeping, ‘Jane informs us that she is unable to resist the pathos of Mrs. Godwin’s appeal’, though after half an hour’s reflection Jane did exactly that, and her mother returned ‘without answering a word’ to England.¹⁸ She became alienated enough from that mother, however, to stay with Mary and Shelley when they returned to England broke and disgraced, with Mary pregnant. In so doing Clairmont cast her lot in with the ghost of Mary Wollstonecraft and with the free-spirited and daring aspect of the Godwinian ethos, an aspect that William Godwin had always promoted more in theory than in practice, and one for which Mary Jane Godwin would have had no sympathy, knowing first-hand the life of a fallen woman. She was the businesswoman, her husband the fading visionary. And yet she had made a home for her daughter, one loving enough that in 1832

¹⁸ *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1: 1814–1822, 8.

Clairmont recognized Lady Mount Cashell's steadfast maternal kindness as something she had known before.

Let us turn, at last, to Cl Cl 26 and test the hypothesis that Claire Clairmont and not Mary Jane Godwin is the author of the letters to Lady Mount Cashell therein. Their context is Clairmont's recollections written for Trelawny in 1869 and 1870 in direct response to a report that Allegra had been seen alive. 'This report', she wrote in November 1869,

forced me to recollect and review all that part of my existence between the years 1816 and 1822. There came to my recollection particular principles which Lord Byron was always insisting on in opposition to Shelley, who thought quite differently and which principles to my judgment appear to favour the commission of bad actions of every kind.¹⁹

Much of her writing to Trelawny is dedicated to the exposition of Byron's wickedness, and despite her intention of countering Trelawny's idea 'that I have a Bee in my Bonnet as regards Lord Byron' (Cl Cl 26, p. 43), these pages go far to prove exactly that. The phrase itself, in Trelawny's use as Clairmont quotes it, is deeply misogynist. Its implication is, 'You foolish woman, don't tell me about your sorrows and wrongs, tell me about the great poets you were lucky enough to live with.' Little wonder, then, that Clairmont might have wanted to raise the ghosts of the only two women who had tried to protect her. It is possible, too, that Trelawny's impatience with her contributes to the Gothic tone of the letters by setting her on the defensive, further encouraging her sense of victimhood.

Clairmont's sense that her brief acquaintance with Byron had ruined her life was perfectly accurate. Nonetheless, the vituperation of these pages, with their recurring descriptions of Byron as a human tiger who cared for nothing but his own will and who had sent Allegra to the convent in Bagnacavallo knowing that it was a miserable disease-ridden place, have, in addition to the Gothic tone, the staleness of decades of repetition, even (or especially) if those repetitions had largely taken place in Clairmont's mind. She had rightly objected to Bagnacavallo in 1821 and she was still protesting on the same grounds in 1869.²⁰

The letters to Lady Mount Cashell attributed to Mary Jane Godwin, however, are set in the time before Claire Clairmont knew Byron. The first, and shortest, is a panicked note dated 7 August 1814, telling Lady Mount Cashell that Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont have run away. The Godwins believe they are headed to Italy and beg Lady Mount Cashell to try to 'get Claire into your possession'. Like all the letters, it is addressed to Casa Silva in Pisa, where Lady Mount Cashell spent

¹⁹ Cl Cl 26, p. 35. Also included in *Clairmont Correspondence*, II, 599–600.

²⁰ For her objections in 1821, see *Clairmont Correspondence*, I, 163.

the latter part of her life and where the Shelleys and Clairmont became acquainted with her, thanks to a letter of introduction from William Godwin. If we think of the letters as a short one-sided epistolary novel, this is an effective beginning — the problem is set out and, as with most of the surviving letters from Mary Jane Godwin, she is asking a favour.²¹

The second letter, dated in the fair copy 20 August, is the longest. In the rough draft it is dated 16 August and 2 September before the writer settles on 20 August (*Fig. 7*). After hoping that Lady Mount Cashell, Mr Tighe, and their two little girls are doing well, the writer describes in detail the elopement on 28 July and the events that led up to it: Shelley's flirtation with Frances Imlay Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft's elder daughter, and his disdain for Mary Jane Godwin once Frances has been sent off to her aunts in Dublin; Claire Clairmont's sisterly relationship with him, and Mary Godwin's return from Scotland — 'then began all our troubles' (Cl Cl 26, p. 69). These troubles included Shelley's falling in love with Mary Godwin and her promise not to encourage him; discussions with Harriet Westbrook Shelley; Shelley's dramatic threat in the Godwins' schoolroom of double suicide with Mary Godwin, crying, 'They wish to separate us, my beloved, but Death shall unite us', as he handed her a vial of laudanum and pulled out a pistol for himself; and of Shelley's attempted suicide by laudanum at his lodgings a week later (Cl Cl 26, pp. 71, 72). The letter goes on to describe the elopement of Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont, and their flight to Calais pursued by Godwin's friend and helper James Marshall (pp. 73–76).

Here are some of the falsehoods and errors in this narrative: most obviously, Mary Jane Godwin did not call her daughter Claire at this point (or ever), and Lady Mount Cashell was, as we have seen, known as Mrs

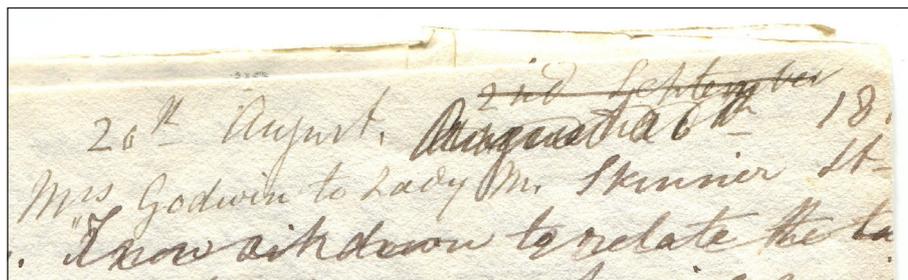


Fig. 7: Detail of draft of letter 2, Cl Cl 26, showing the change of dates. Author's own photograph.

²¹ The Pforzheimer Collection holds fourteen letters from Mary Jane Godwin, written between 1805 and 1839. In every one of them she asks for something from the addressee, and in most the favour is the reason for her writing. I have not been able to examine all her letters at the Bodleian, but those that have been digitized reveal a similar pattern.

Mason.²² It was Mary Jane Godwin and not Marshall who went to Calais. Frances Imlay Godwin probably never went to her aunts in Dublin, but instead to Pentredevey, Wales in May 1814. Most importantly, so far from being in Pisa, Lady Mount Cashell had visited the Godwins in London on the date of the first letter, 7 August 1814. With George Tighe and their little girl Laurette, she was on her way to Italy but the party travelled slowly and did not reach Pisa until 18 October 1814.²³ They did not know in August that they would take up residence at the Casa Silva, where all the letters are addressed. Although the second letter mentions ‘your two little girls’, the younger daughter Nerina was not born until June 1815. Although Lady Mount Cashell had published with the Godwins’ publishing firm, M. J. Godwin and Co., she did not live in London and most of her adult life before 1814 was spent in Ireland or Continental Europe. It is unlikely, therefore, that Claire Clairmont knew her well at this point, if at all, so the assertion that Claire ‘is so very fond of you — your words will be obeyed’ is unlikely to be true. The lesson of these two letters is that P. B. Shelley is a manipulative scoundrel who will not let Mary or Claire eat meat, forces them to read philosophy, and study Italian. He tells Claire that Mary Jane Godwin has sworn never to speak to her again, and refuses to let her write to her mother. Claire, who though ‘nearly sixteen is as much of a child as if she were only twelve’, is entirely his victim (Cl Cl 26, p. 62). (She was, in fact, sixteen.)

The third letter, dated 15 November 1814, continues with a wholly spurious framework. We know from their journals that the runaways returned to England on 13 September and were in touch with the Godwins two days later, Mary Jane and Frances Imlay Godwin talking with them through a window on 16 September. Claire Clairmont had the most contact with the Godwin household on Skinner Street, and the Godwins pressured her to return there, but ultimately (the choice took less than a week), she chose to stay with Shelley and Mary Godwin in the uncomfortable household that they had made up. The letter, however, maintains the fiction that the party’s whereabouts are a mystery and describes the Godwins’ anxiety over the missing girls, especially Claire (the fourth letter, dated April 1815, persists in this fiction and adds that of Bow Street officers being called in, though proving useless and expensive, they are soon dismissed). Here, to illustrate the Godwins’ sufferings, Clairmont places in the mouth of Harriet Shelley the rumour that Godwin had sold the girls for seven and eight hundred pounds each. In Mary Jane Godwin’s voice, she names a string of friends and acquaintances who are said to have dropped the Godwins on the news of their disgrace. But Harriet Shelley, said to have called ‘the other day’,

²² Although Godwin, who dropped second ‘i’s as a matter of principle, calls her Mountcashell in his diary.

²³ Edward McAleer, *The Sensitive Plant: A Life of Lady Mount Cashell* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 125.

had not called since July; the Godwins had not seen her since August, and may never have seen her again (Cl Cl 26, p. 78). The families alleged to have dropped the Godwins either did not drop them or had done so long before the summer of 1814.²⁴

The extent to which the letters are false should now be clear. Their relationship to time is the primary problem: the letters' inaccuracy as to the dates of events they describe, their tergiversation on the dates of writing, and the nonetheless oddly regular series of those dates all conspire to imply that the writer composed the letters as a continuous series, and either did not have, or, did not take advantage of, Godwin's diaries. These implications mark the beginning of my explicit argument that Claire Clairmont wrote the letters. If we accept that they were written *ex post facto* as a single narrative, then we have to think of either the mother or the daughter sitting down to compose them.

In either case, the letters bear at moments a similarity in tone to other memoirs of the period by women who had things to hide or who found themselves on the defensive. One thinks of the actress and writer Mary Robinson (1758–1800), for instance, a friend of Mary Wollstonecraft's, whose posthumously published memoirs break off just as she is about to embark on her affair with the Prince of Wales, and who implicitly blames her husband for being 'perfectly careless' concerning her reputation and for passing his leisure hours 'with the most abandoned women', while 'even my own servants complained of his illicit advances'.²⁵ One might read them, too, alongside Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), a vehemently self-defensive novel turning around Hays's frustrated love for a Cambridge philosopher, in which she quotes from the letters she wrote to William Godwin and those he wrote to her. These examples are from the generation just before Claire Clairmont's, but the power of a smeared reputation to banish a woman from polite society was only stronger in her youth, and stronger still by the time she was composing these letters in the late nineteenth century.

More particular arguments support her authorship as well. We know that Mary Jane Godwin was capable of highly manipulative and demanding letters, such as those she wrote to Claire's biological father to induce him to support the child, but the sustained narrative of these letters is not like anything else she wrote. The closest she came is a guide to Herne Bay

²⁴ These families were the Kenneys, the Nicholsons, the Tuthills, the Hamilton Rowans, and Basil Montagu. According to Godwin's diary, Kenney and Basil Montagu continue to call; Nicholson visits in January 1814, then not till May 1815; Hamilton Rowan does not visit between 1808 and 1818; and the Tuthills had not visited since 1812 and were never recorded to do so again. William Godwin's Diary, <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/index2.html>> [accessed 14 October 2018].

²⁵ *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson*, ed. by [Mary Elizabeth Robinson] (London: Cobden-Sanders, 1930), p. 130.

written in late life after a happy stay there. Nor are the letters written in her complex syntax or her habitual wheedle and, beyond the request to rescue Claire, they ask nothing of Lady Mount Cashell.

Clairmont, on the other hand, though hardly a professional writer, produced narratives intermittently throughout her life, and the familiar letter was the genre in which she excelled. These particular letters are far from excellent pieces of writing, in part because their purpose is fundamentally different from that of most letters. They are not written in the heat of present experience to let someone know what is happening, but to present a history to both a general audience — posterity — and a particular one — Trelawny. They are entirely credible as the productions of a septuagenarian who has been harbouring resentments for fifty years. Too long a sacrifice did not make a stone of Clairmont's heart, but decades of emotions and thoughts circulating and recirculating through the same channels, unchallenged by full, long-term human relationship, had drained it of freshness. The fountain turned to salt. In favour of her authorship, the same argument that implied her having merely doctored the letters still stands: they are Clairmont's justification of herself as Shelley's victim, and her invention of a past defined by the protection of her mother and of Lady Mount Cashell.

One clear source for the narratives of the letters is novels, particularly Gothic novels. For example, in the single letter from Mary Jane Godwin to Lady Mount Cashell that is not part of this series, and which is set after the suicides of Harriet Westbrook Shelley and Frances Imlay Godwin in late 1816, Clairmont recounts to Trelawny how the Shelleys came to be married. The narrative situation is made more complex than it is elsewhere in *Cl Cl* 26 because Clairmont transcribes, accurately, a real letter from Shelley to her within the present one to Trelawny — Shelley's written 30 December 1816, directly after he and Mary Godwin had been married. Shelley mentions in it his antipathy towards Mary Jane Godwin and her display of 'affectation, prejudice, and heartless pride', and describes the melancholy of the now empty schoolroom where he used to see Fanny and the rest of the children.

Clairmont's account, 'transcribed from my mother's letter', uses all this in its novelistic scene setting. In the order of *Cl Cl* 26 — that is, the whole mass of papers — this is the first time she mentions a transcription from her mother, and perhaps this is the beginning of the whole scheme of fabricating letters for Trelawny. She shows Shelley resisting William Godwin's insistence that he marry Mary, now that Harriet is dead. After agonized discussions and a consultation with Sir Lumley Skeffington (a playwright and fop who does not appear in Godwin's diary between 1808 and 1821), Mary Godwin goes to Skinner Street at her father's bidding and the scene returns to the schoolroom. Shelley and William Godwin continue to argue:

Mr. Shelley repeated all his reasons against marriage and seemed determined not to perform the ceremony. Mary was sitting at another part of the room listening attentively — when there seemed no likelihood of either party agreeing, she rose and coming up to Shelley, put her hand on his shoulder and said — ‘Of course you are free to do what you please — and I am free to act as I like and I have to tell you dear Shelley, if you do not marry me, I will not live — I will destroy myself and my child with me.’ (Cl Cl 26, p. 62)

Shelley grows pale and acquiesces. Clairmont returns to this scene at the end of her letter to Trelawny and has her mother make

some remarks about Mary’s conduct being worthy of the Authoress of *Frankenstein* which she had read in Manuscript, also of the sagacity she shewed in threatening him with a third suicide on his account in the very room in which he had lived so familiarly both with Harriet and Frances. (Cl Cl 26, p. 63)

Whether Clairmont is weaving together a memory of an actual letter from her mother with the letter from Shelley, or remembering conversations with Mary Jane Godwin, or just making it up — all are possible — this scene of wrenching melodrama, completely out of character for Mary Shelley, only needs some landscape description to be worthy of Ann Radcliffe. It shows, too, that she appreciated ‘the incurable romancer’ Trelawny’s appetite for the fabulous and was ready to feed it.

Elsewhere, when plot is not so important, the narrative becomes more credible. The letters are a tissue of lies, but they are not made up out of whole cloth. It is difficult to say how much truth value they carry, but there is some. Mary Jane Godwin lived one part of the story these letters tell, and Clairmont lived another. Some parts of her narrative ring true: describing their carriage ride towards Dover in July 1814, for instance, she writes,

Mary lay the whole journey with her head against the side of the chaise. Mr. S— sat in the middle whispering consolation to her and C— looked out the window and sometimes shed a tear or two and said she felt the end of the world were come, it was all so strange and wonderful to her. (Cl Cl 26, p. 86; earlier version, p. 134)

Much less rings true for the parts of the letters that convey Mary Jane Godwin’s experience. As much as Clairmont presents herself as a victim, her mother, too, is painted as an unfortunate, and the effect of special pleading is strong. For example, in the third letter, Mary Jane Godwin describes life on Skinner Street without the girls:

Our house is now indeed a gloomy one. Mr G— is ill. I am busy from nine in the Morning till nine at night in my Counting house. No Mary to help me with her great talents her sagacity, her steady industry. No man of forty is more steady than she is at any business you set her to do; however difficult she succeeds in all she undertook [inserted: takes] except music. No Claire with her cheerful temper and obliging disposition, always pleased to be sent here and there and make herself useful.²⁶

Clairmont may be imputing to her mother memories she imagined Mary Jane Godwin to have had; but possibly she is remembering, and highlighting in pink, remarks her mother made in her last years. There is no way to tell. When Clairmont has her narrator, 'Mary Jane Godwin', describe her own character she is perhaps even less convincing:

As for me, I am so silly I never trouble myself about want of money. I have supported the whole family now for eleven years by my toils, I can go on doing so for a few more years till they are old enough to earn their own bread and then it will be their turn to support me when I am too old to work. (Cl Cl 26, p. 98; earlier version, p. 150)

Mrs Godwin certainly *was* troubled about the family's want of money — she may have left business outside of the Juvenile Library to her husband, but she constantly looked out for the family's financial interest.

Silliness is key here. Throughout these letters it is a strongly insisted on aspect of Mary Jane Godwin's character, along with vulgarity. The extracts above from her letters to Laman Blanchard make it clear that while she may have been smarmy and unlikeable (almost no one but Godwin and, possibly, Claire Clairmont seems to have been fond of her), she was neither silly nor vulgar. When, in the second letter, Shelley argues with Marshall at Calais that Claire will stay with him and Mary, his argument is against Mary Jane Godwin: while he is not in the least in love with Claire, 'her Mother is such a vulgar commonplace woman without one idea of philosophy I do not think her a proper person to form the mind of a young girl' (Cl Cl 26, p. 74; earlier version, p. 132). Shelley may indeed have been an intellectual snob, but so was the whole Godwin household — with parents who had written such significant books as *Political Justice* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and, after 1818, a daughter who had written *Frankenstein*, it is understandable that the daughter who had not

²⁶ Cl Cl 26, p. 82, with an earlier version at p. 128. Notice that she takes the chance to get a dig in at Mary Shelley's lack of musical ability; elsewhere, Clairmont has Mary Jane Godwin quote the music master Domenico Corri's praise of her voice — 'a string of pearls each note was so perfect' (Cl Cl 26, p. 97).

published any novel might make an implicit alliance with the mother who had not written any *Vindication*.

'Shelley', indeed (it should be understood that all historical personages here are characters in Clairmont's fiction), is not the only one who paints Mary Jane Godwin as silly and unsophisticated. Clairmont has her condemn herself out of her own mouth. In the final letter, set in 1816, 'Mary Jane Godwin' explains to Lady Mount Cashell that Shelley has unexpectedly provided for Claire in his will. She writes:

I feel grateful most grateful to him that he is so careful of her future welfare. I never could have believed that such a harum scarum man could be so thoughtful. But I suppose that what I read in a book last Sunday that appearances are fallacious is true. (Cl Cl 26, p. 96; earlier version, p. 114)

This sentence is particularly egregious in its implication of the writer's simple-mindedness — 'ideocy', as the young Claire Clairmont might have spelled it. *The Ideot* is the unpublished novel of her youth. Its heroine is built on the model of the protagonists of Robert Bage's *Hermesprung* (1796), Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796), or any of the novels inspired by Rousseau. Clairmont described it to Byron in 1816:

My intention was this — To draw a character committing every violence against received opinion — one, educated amongst mountains & deserts [with] no other guide than herself or the impulses arising from herself. [...] Who, notwithstanding the apparent enormity of her actions should appear highly amiable, full of noble affections & sympathies. (*Clairmont Correspondence*, 1, 33)

Byron consented to look at the manuscript, despised it, and the novel died (1, 92). By the time she was writing *The Ideot*, the trope of naive virtue bred in the wilderness was entirely cliché, but Claire Clairmont never gave it up; Pauline Clairmont, Charles Clairmont's eldest child, wrote to her brother in 1873 of her aunt's 'funny ways with men — when she plays the *Gurli*, or the imbecile, which she does to perfection'.²⁷ Here, probably writing just a few years earlier than Pauline's observation, together with Mary Jane Godwin's astonishment that 'appearances are fallacious', Clairmont asserts places for herself and her mother in the gallery of simple-minded but virtuous protagonists.

²⁷ Quoted in Marion Kingston Stocking, 'Miss Tina and Miss Plin: The Papers behind *The Aspern Papers*', in *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, Michael C. Jaye, and Betty T. Bennett (New York: New York University Press, 1978), pp. 372–84 (p. 379).

And yet their idiocy is mitigated, as well, and all mothers are vindicated in the fourth letter, a long one in which Mary Jane Godwin and Claire Clairmont are reunited at last after Clairmont's return from the 1814 elopement. (If the time does not seem to make sense, remember that we must think of these letters as having been composed in a series over a fairly short period of time, *c.* late 1869 to mid-1870.) Clairmont describes a letter from her mother to P. B. Shelley, invoking Lady Mount Cashell's protection against Shelley's insults:

Perhaps you [i.e. Lady Mount Cashell] will be vexed, but I mentioned you to him as our friend and that you were most distinguished by genius, by your liberal opinions and every virtue, yet how different you were from him for let a woman be as poor or ignorant as possible I was certain you would consider her maternal feelings as worthy of as much care, consideration and respect as those of the most refined and philosophical lady. (Cl Cl 26, p. 85; earlier version, p. 132)

Mary Jane Godwin may or may not have known that Shelley entertained considerable respect for Lady Mount Cashell's mind; Claire Clairmont certainly did know it. By enlisting Lady Mount Cashell's charity on the side of mothers (wed or unwed), she defends all of them against what she remembered as Shelley's snobbery and makes a case for the value of ignorant and vulgar women. Insulting her mother in her defence is a perverse way to argue. But Claire Clairmont was nothing if not perverse, and her backwards-in-high-heels defence of herself, Lady Mount Cashell, and her mother in these letters is deeply characteristic; this is, after all, someone who, though she expected after her death 'to be kicked into a ditch like a dog', also wrote her own epitaph, duly inscribed on her tomb: 'In memory of Clara Mary Constantia Jane Clairmont [...]. She passed her life in sufferings, expiating not only her faults but also her virtues' (*Clairmont Correspondence*, II, 661, 664). Her final forgiveness, or at least attachment, to Shelley — or at any rate, to Shelley's immortalizing of her — may be seen in her adoption of the name by which he addressed her in his poem 'To Constantia'.

Postscript

There is one final piece of evidence for the argument that Mary Jane Godwin did not write the letters attributed to her by her daughter, the evidence of Claire Clairmont's will. She directed that her valuables be sold and the proceeds invested, the interest going to her niece Pauline, whom she calls Paula and who also went by Paola and, in the family, Plin (*Fig. 8*). The capital was reserved for 'my dear Georgina Hanghegyi who is living with me' (II, 661). Besides Clairmont's money, the valuables consisted chiefly

of her letters — letters from both the Shelleys, from Trelawny, from Percy Florence Shelley, and a brief piece of writing by Lady Mount Cashell. These are all to be sold. Her copies of the letters from the Shelleys are to go to Pauline, who is begged to preserve them ‘as they would prove of great value in case of the destruction of the originals’ (II, 661). Pauline was not trusted with the executorship, which went to a son-in-law of Lady Mount Cashell. Surely, with Clairmont giving this attention to originals and copies, and with her knowledge of their value from the manuscript hunters who had been haunting her for years, she would have mentioned the letters from Mary Jane Godwin if they had any direct source in her mother. But she does not. Clairmont herself did not trust enough in their credibility to name them among her papers.

Her will constitutes her last gesture on behalf of unmarried mothers and their daughters, even as it continues a final *agon*. For Georgina



Fig. 8: Gebrüder König, portrait of Pauline Clairmont, 1875, photograph. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Hanghegyi (1864–1885), whose Hungarian surname translates roughly to Clairmont, was Pauline’s illegitimate daughter.²⁸ Clairmont offered to adopt her almost as soon as she knew of the child’s existence, in 1871. So far from having a peaceful old age, in the last years of her life Clairmont entered into an unwinnable competition with Pauline for the child’s affections. With its implicit mistrust of her niece, and claim on her great-niece, Claire Clairmont’s legacy was as fraught with contention as the rest of her life had been.

²⁸ For the story of this struggle and of the disposition of Clairmont’s papers, see Marion Stocking’s valuable article, ‘Miss Tina and Miss Plin’, referred to above.