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THE ANNUAL MARY SHELLEY IN BULGARIAN

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Mary Shelley's reputation rests on a *perennial* text whose title is better known than her name. In the 1820s and the 1830s, however, writing for literary annuals was a way to make ends meet, even if she was not allowed to use her married name and signed her publications as "the author of *Frankenstein*". The tales she wrote for the newly fashionable gift-books were less original and more generic: they seemed *annual* in terms of longevity as well. This paper considers a Bulgarian publication of 2008 that includes three of those tales, *The Evil Eye, Transformation* and *The Mortal Immortal*. They originally appeared in *The Keepsake* in 1830, 1831 and 1834, and were translated into Bulgarian by Milen Ruskov.

Key words: Mary Shelley, tales, translation, reception, Bulgaria

Mary Shelley's claim to fame very much depends on a novel which unleashes the myth about creating a monster that destroys its creator. Journalistic references, pop-culture and translations into other languages have made *Frankenstein* known around the world, lending it the potency to multiply and reinvent itself. To put it metaphorically, the author's reputation rests on a *perennial* text whose title is better known than her name. In terms of biographical facts, after the publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818, Mary Shelley kept on writing but nothing got published before Percy Shelley's death. And then she was suddenly responsible for financing her small bereaved family. The shocking loss of her husband was followed by difficult negotiations with Sir Timothy Shelley, her father-in-law, who had been "profoundly humiliated" and had never forgiven his son for his second elopement, "writing off the Godwin/Wollstonecraft girl as a whore" (Gordon 2016: 102). Eventually Sir Timothy agreed to pay a small annuity to her on the condition that she was to play by his rules:

> He refused to meet them, but did offer some financial support, granting Mary a scant £200 a year – £100 for her and £100 for Percy. […] Furthermore, he made the money contingent on her continued residence in England, and, worse, on a kind of gag rule. She was not to publish any of Shelley's works or write anything about him. If she disregarded either of these stipulations, she would be cut off without a penny. Finally, if Sir Timothy discovered that Mary was in debt and could not support herself and her son, then he would seize Percy – Mary's greatest fear.
>
> (Gordon 2016: 471)

This money was not enough to make ends meet, and writing for literary annuals was a way out for her in the 1820s and the 1830s, even if she was not allowed to use her married name and signed her publications as "the author of *Frankenstein*". Compared to the phenomenon that made her name and went global, the tales she published in the newly fashionable gift-books were less original and more generic; thus, the stories they told had less of an impact; in other words, they seemed ***annual*** in terms of longevity as well.

The first literary annual was the *Forget Me Not* and it dates back to 1822 (Sussman 2003: 164). *The Keepsake*, published between 1828 and 1857, turned out to be the most successful of them and became the most important outlet for the short stories Mary Shelley offered to a predominantly female audience (Robinson 1990: xii). According to Charles Robinson, often pieces of writing worked around engravings chosen in advance to be printed in the forthcoming edition and the details of the stories were sometimes tailored according to the visual (Robinson 1990: xvi). *The Keepsake* was thought of as a Christmas-time publication to be gifted to middle-class women, so the content was somewhat sentimental (Robinson 1990: xii-xiii). Nevertheless, it attracted formidable contributors – for the first couple of volumes we have Wordsworth, Coleridge and Sir Walter Scott, Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley – even though the latter two were no longer among the living.

Three of the short stories that Mary Shelley wrote for *The Keepsake* have made it into Bulgarian with the help of translator Milen Ruskov. They were published in book form in 2008, featuring some black-and-white illustrations that re-introduced the author to the Bulgarian audience, who (up to that point) had only Zhechka Georgieva's translation of *Frankenstein*, published in 1981 and in 1986, and accompanied by Dimitri Ivanov's and Georgi Tsankov's forewords, to popularise her name. The original titles of these three stories, in the order in which they appear in this 2008 edition, are *Transformation* (1831), *The Mortal Immortal* (1834), and *The Evil Eye* (1830). The book was named after the first story, Mary Shelley's most

popular, perhaps due to the gothic details mixed into the moralising sort of narrative. The translated title, *Преображение*, can be rendered back into English as *Transfiguration*, and the first association of any Christian reader, whether religious or just culturally aware, is with the Transfiguration of Jesus in the New Testament. The story itself, however, is not Christian. It is a first-person narrative from the point of view of the protagonist, Guido, and it takes place in Genoa, the superb but also the proud city, *Genova la Superba*, the city of the two-faced Janus (Wiggins, Gourlay 2019: 37-38). Guido describes himself as proud, arrogant and disagreeable; he has a childhood sweetheart, Juliet, but before proposing to her he manages to squander his inheritance and her father becomes naturally protective of the possessions she would bring into the marriage; the protagonist overreacts to the limitations imposed on his patriarchal freedom to dispose of his future wife's property as he pleases, falls out with her father and is eventually exiled from Genoa. At the seashore he witnesses a shipwreck and meets a supernatural being, an evil spirit in the shape and form of an ugly dwarf, who proposes a chest full of treasure should Guido lend him his handsome body for three days. After some deliberation the protagonist accepts the offer and the deal is sealed with the mixing of their blood. He realises he has made a grave mistake when the evil spirit does not return as agreed. Guido intuits that he would be cheated out of his life and starts on a painful journey, with the body of a dwarf, to the outskirts of Genoa where he expects to find Juliet and her father in their summer villa. There he discovers that his antagonist (passing himself off as the exiled fiancé) has demonstrated remorse for Guido's former behaviour, has been forgiven and accepted, and is to be married to Juliet the following day.

A couple of intertextual associations come to mind: one more superficial, along the lines of "a dwarf is about to replace the hero and get married to the heroine", aligns Mary Shelley's tale with E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The King's Bride" but the agendas of the two authors are entirely divergent. We do not know whether she was acquainted with any of his writing prior to 1834 when *The Sandman* found itself in *The Keepsake* for that year in English translation. Mary Shelley had a publication of her own in the collection and, presumably, would have leafed through it. Interestingly, the table of contents for the 1834 *Keepsake* volume features the name of Hoffmann's translator, Lord Albert Conyngham, rather than that of the author of *The Sandman*. In any case, "The King's Bride" is a spoof – a parody of idyllic pastoral life, on the one hand (the protagonist and her passion for her vegetable garden that gives rise to the dwarfish vegetable king), and of spiritual strivings, on the other hand, be they in the form of

cabalistic mysticism (the heroine's father, who is incapable of assisting her) or poetic pretensions (her fiancé's choice to give her up for the role of a court poet and then involuntarily destroying the dwarf king with his poetry). This narrative could not have influenced *Transformation*. Another association worth mentioning seems to be Coleridge's *Christabel*, but with a caveat. The narrative poem about the origin of evil was never finished. In it Geraldine personifies evil and we are left with a picture of her, charming the widowed Sir Leoline and casting a spell over his innocent daughter Christabel. We know that Christabel was engaged to be married but her fiancé was away. According to Coleridge's first biographer, James Gillman, the poet was planning an ending along the following lines:

> [Geraldine] changes her appearance to that of the accepted, though absent, lover of Christabel. Now ensues a courtship most distressing to Christabel, who feels – she knows not why – great disgust for her once favored knight.
>
> This coldness is very painful to the Baron, who has no more conception than herself of the supernatural transformation. She at last yields to her father's entreaties, and consents to approach the altar with the hated suitor. The real lover, returning, enters at this moment, and produces the ring which she had once given him in sign of her betrothment. Thus defeated, the supernatural being Geraldine disappears. As predicted, the castle bell tolls, the mother's voice is heard, and, to the exceeding great joy of the parties, the rightful marriage takes place, after which follows a reconciliation and explanation between father and daughter.
>
> (Gillman 1838: 301)

Had the poet realised this vision, had he written the ending of *Christabel*, posterity would have been in a position to evaluate how much the poem had to do with Mary Shelley's tale. But he never did. The biography itself was first published in 1838. We do know that Coleridge visited William Godwin on a number of occasions and that Mary was fascinated by him – did they ever discuss his plans for *Christabel* in front of her, though?

In Shelley's *Transformation*, the imminent marriage between Juliet and the dwarf disguised as her fiancé calls for immediate intervention and, upon seeing the enemy, Guido starts a fight, in which he stabs his handsome body inhabited by the other and, simultaneously, the body of the dwarf he is in is mortally wounded, the blood mixes and the spell is broken. Badly injured as he is, the next thing Guido becomes aware of is Juliet taking care of him while he is convalescing, restored to his own body. In the end, the narrator tells us, he becomes known as *Guido il Cortese*, "a prodigy of politeness" (Wiggins, Gourlay 2019: 37); he has learned the importance of

humility, and he retains some reminders of the mortal combat in the paleness of his face and his slightly stooped posture, but accepts his confessor's interpretation of events as his guardian angel interfering to cure his excessive pride. The overall moral of the story might be sought in the necessity to overcome one's pride as it is one of the seven deadly sins in Christianity, but on second thoughts, there lurks a sort of duplicity that backs conformity in the interest of comfort and convenience for the individual.

Clearly, this is not a Christian story about the Transfiguration of Jesus. Therefore, I felt obliged to check dictionary definitions. According to the *Dictionary of the Bulgarian language*, the word „*ПРЕОБРАЖЀНИЕ*" means *1. Преобразяване; метаморфоза.* ("transformation; metamorphosis"), and only then, *2. Християнският празник Преображение Господне* ("the Christian celebration of the Transfiguration of Jesus"). Even so, the introductory examples of usage with the first meaning involve Jesus (St. Zagorchinov) and God (Em. Stanev) (Krumova-Tsvetkova, Choroleeva, eds 2012).

An interesting aspect of the Bulgarian rendition is the translation of the epigraphs that Mary Shelley used for two of the three stories in this book. For the *Transformation* story she quoted Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a favourite with her since she was 8: "For Mary, Coleridge's rounded, rolling voice created wild imaginary scenes she would never forget. For the rest of her days, she would be able to recall each word, reciting it to the poets she would later come to know, ensuring Coleridge's influence on the next generation of Romantic writers." (Gordon 2016: 30). The lines she referenced for her tale are these:

> Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
> With a woful agony,
> Which forced me to begin my tale;
> And then it left me free.
> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns.
>
> Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*
> (Reynolds, ed. 1831: 18)

In 2008 there was no Bulgarian translation of the ballad. Milen Ruskov's rendering has prioritised the content over the form, which allows readers to see Mary Shelley's narrator on a par with Coleridge's Mariner.

И мигом цялото ми тяло
се сгърчи от ужасна болка.
Тя ме принуди да разкажа
всичко, преди да ме освободи.

Оттогава в някой тъмен час
онази болка се завръща
и докато не свърша своя разказ
сърцето ми се свива и гори.
Колридж, „Поема за стария моряк“
(Shelley 2008: 7)

The other epigraph introduces the third story in the collection, *The Evil Eye*, and is from Canto II of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (stanza lviii). The exoticism of the reference corresponds to the exotic location for Shelley's story:

The wild Albanian kirtled to his knee,
With shawl-girt head and ornamented gun,
And gold-embroider'd garments, fair to see;
The crimson-scarfed man of Macedon.
Lord Byron
(Reynolds, ed. 1830: 150)

It is a declaration of inspiration. Once again the translation seems to be Milen Ruskov's, even though there was Dimitar Statkov's poetical translation of Byron's poem (1958) to quote from. The rhyme and rhythm have been sacrificed but the meaning of words is as close as one can get to the original:

Дивият албанец със поли до коленете
с глава, увита с кърпа, с украсена пушка
и златоткани дрехи, галещи окото.
И македонецът със пурпурното шалче.
Лорд Байрон, „Странстванията на Чайлд Харолд“
(Shelley 2008: 83)

For comparison, this is how Dimitar Statkov had already rendered these lines:

Албанец горд, с чалма увил главата,
с резба върху пищова украсен,
по дрехите с везба от тънко злато;
и македонец с пояс и чепкен;…
(Byron 1958: 84)

The Balkans rush in from the very opening of this latter story with the foreign names, foreign words and obscure ethnicities: there are Moreots, Albanians, Greeks, Mainotes, Arnaoots and inherited enmities in the Ottoman Empire; the Moirae and Thracian witchcraft get mentioned, and the superstition of the evil eye is central to the narrative. The text dates back to 1830 and, even though the last in this mini-collection, it was published before the other two, reiterating Byron's credo (suggested by Madame de Stael) that the East was the greenest isle of the imagination. Shelley's narrative exposes the clash between biographical (social) conditioning and the biological reflex along the lines of "blood is thicker than water". It differs from *Frankenstein* in demonstrating that experience is not everything. The unfolding of the story feels rather predictable even though the narrator relies on building tension by degrees. The protagonist is Albanian and was nicknamed "the Evil Eye" after tragedy struck – during his absence his wife was murdered and his young daughter was kidnapped by the Mainotes. The translator has provided a note to explain "Mainotes" and, independently of Mary Shelley, has referenced Byron's poem *The Giaour* that mentions them. He stops short of quoting from it but points to the parallel drawn between island-pirates and those rebels – here is the relevant excerpt:

> Far, dark, along the blue sea glancing,
> The shadows of the rocks advancing,
> Start on the fisher's eye like boat
> Of island-pirate or Mainote;
> And fearful for his light caique
> He shuns the near but doubtful creek,…
>
> (Byron 2000: 212; ll.168-173)

Indeed, Ioannina and Ali Pasha are associated with the poet's trip to the Ottoman Empire and there is no doubt that Mary Shelley was drawing on his experience when writing her story. She was also inspired by Prosper Mérimée's *La Guzla*, which claimed to be *a Selection of Illyric Poems Collected in Dalmatia, Bosnia, Croatia and Herzegovina*, but the majority of poems were literary fabrications rather than folklore. Mary Shelley reviewed the publication and translated three of the texts in her review. She introduced one of the translations, "The Flame of Perrussich", by saying,

> Another of the poems is founded on the oaths of friendship which it is usual for the Illyrian warriors to take one with the other. Two men thus united are called Pobratimi, or half brothers; they often sacrifice their lives for each other, and any quarrel between them is as scandalous as if, among us, a son ill-treated his father.
>
> (Shelley 1829: 73)

This poem gave her the idea about the sworn-brotherhood relationship between her characters, Katusthius Ziani and Dmitri. The former is a Moreot, while the latter is an Albanian. The Greek name *Dimitrios* (*Dimitris*) is very popular on the Balkans but the Albanian version is along the lines of *Dhimitër* (Behind the Name 2024). The protagonist's Christian name Dmitri and the use of the foreign word "*Pobratimi*" in her story both have a Slavonic ring to them and create local colour, even if in her footnote the author uses Greece as an umbrella term for Ottoman territory:

> * In Greece, especially in Illyria and Epirus, it is no uncommon thing for persons of the same sex to swear friendship; the church contains a ritual to consecrate this vow. Two men thus united are called pobratimi, the women posestrime.
>
> (Reynolds, ed. 1830: 150f)

The translator cancelled the footnote and left it to the Bulgarian readers' knowledge of the word "*pobratim*". Another text that Mary Shelley translated in her review of Prosper Mérimée's collection was "Maximus and Zoe", a poem "founded on the superstition attached to an evil eye, which, whomsoever it looks on, it kills" (Shelley 1829: 75). This gave her the nickname for her protagonist and the title of the story. Dmitri the Evil Eye kidnaps a small child to help out someone who saved his life (the Moreot Katusthius Ziani). As it turns out the boy's mother is Dmitri's long lost daughter. The storytelling is fragmented and the points of view seem to change, both of which are reminiscent of the narration in *The Giaour*. The Bulgarian-language reader, however, has no access to Byron's poem in translation.

The third story sandwiched between *Transformation* and *The Evil Eye* was originally published in the 1834 *Keepsake*. The Bulgarian translation of the title *The Mortal Immortal*, *Безсмъртният смъртен*, rather cleverly expresses the idea by switching the word order in the Bulgarian phrase. (This is the only tale out of the three that I have traced reappearing in Bulgarian, in 2016.) Once again a first-person narrative, it goes back to Cornelius Agrippa, the sixteenth-century mystic mentioned in *Frankenstein*. Ever since the 1990s Bulgarian readers have had access to Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy*, so reading about him in the twenty-first century means one can go and look him up in translation. In Mary Shelley's story, the scholar is associated with a quest for immortality. But one man's dream is another man's downfall – the elixir of life that the magus wants for himself becomes the bane of his student's life. The student remains forever young, while his wife grows older and older. She becomes more and more jealous of him and

we can detect the author's biographical frustrations mapped onto the heroine, but the narrative point of view is the hero's so none of it gets too sentimentalised. The protagonist is 323 years old and, at the beginning of the story (which is retrospectively told), he has had enough of it; he has made up his mind to resolve the issue – he wants to know whether he has an unusually long life or whether he has become immortal; thus, he has decided on an experiment. The readers are not told how his experiment ends, or what the experiment is, for that matter. All there is to know is that Mary Shelley did not relish a long life – on 28th July 1834, the anniversary of her elopement with P.B. Shelley in 1814, aged 37, she wrote in her journal: "20 years are passt – would that 20 more were – if I am doomed to live so long – life is a burthen – and lonely & uncared for my heart dies within me" (Shelley 1987: 540). The story of Mary's life has only recently made it to the Bulgarian reading public, and in a fictionalised form, with the translation of Anne Eekhout's novel, whose narrative is confined to the period 1812-1816. This, of course, means that the Bulgarian-language audience is not familiar with her despondency after Percy Shelley's death in 1822.

The interest in the author behind the tales is reflected in the Bulgarian edition with some 20 illustrations that are occasionally related to the stories at hand but much more often introducing visual representations of Mary Shelley's biography. The cover art is a pictorial fragment of the marble Memorial in Christchurch, Dorset, commissioned by the Shelley family and done by Henry Weekes in 1853-1854, showing "Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley mourning over the body of her husband" (Victorian Web 2016). No identification of the image is included in the copyright page or elsewhere in the publication. Intriguingly, on page 6 we can see a depiction that the National Portrait Gallery has listed as "Unknown woman, formerly known as Mary Shelley" – the artist is Samuel John Sutton and the year, 1831 (National Portrait Gallery 2025). None of this is mentioned in the Bulgarian edition, the only claim being that it is Mary Shelley's portrait. Another dubious image appears on page 48 of this edition. The caption accompanying it announces this as Mary Shelley at 19 years old. According to the extended catalogue entry of the National Portrait Gallery, however, there is a "drawing called Mary Shelley 1816 but of a young lady in the costume and hair-style of 1825 or later [which] is believed to have been given by Trelawny to W. M. Rossetti…" (National Portrait Gallery 2025). Furthermore, on page 82 we find the undated "Watercolour miniature by Reginald Easton … [that] is believed to have been based on a bust modelled from a death-mask (R. L. Poole, *Catalogue of Oxford Portraits*, I, p 119)." (National Portrait Gallery 2025). Finally, the well-known Richard Rothwell

portrait that was family possession appears on the back cover of the book but without the "'flame' in the background, thought […] to represent 'Shelley's spirit hovering over Eternal Rome'" (National Portrait Gallery 2025). Among the visuals dispersed throughout the volume, there is a copy of Mary's birth certificate (Shelley 2008: 9), as well as a facsimile of the page from Godwin's diary, which mentions his daughter's birth at "20 past 11 at night" (Shelley 2008: 15). The portraits of Mary Wollstonecraft (Shelley 2008: 19), Percy Bysshe Shelley (Shelley 2008: 59), Byron (Shelley 2008: 67) and little William (Shelley 2008: 89) peacefully coexist with engravings printed with the stories in *The Keepsake* back in the 1830s (Shelley 2008: 37, 63). The fictional world of the tales and the real-life representations of actual people from Mary Shelley's family and circle are blended, peppered with the paintings of the Villa Diodati or of St Pancras Old Church, all reproduced in black and white and placed with no particular link to the text. A photograph of the memorial marking Mary Shelley's final resting place serves as an inflated full stop after the three tales. It is followed by a brief outline of the author's life.

A legitimate question would be whether this book was conceptualised by the Bulgarian publisher or simply rendered in translation. The copyright page does not specify any particular publication used as the original but the title *Transformation* referenced there implies a book of that title. There is, indeed, an American edition of 2004 by the University of Michigan, Hesperus Classics, that features the same three stories, and in the same order. Descriptions of the American edition make no mention of illustrations. Its cover art, Gothic dusk with bare branches and a couple of birds, suggests a target audience that might be interested in Gothic texts. Thus, the working hypothesis is that the Bulgarian edition reproduced the verbal in translation, providing its own visuals. It comes from the little known *Fama* Publishing House and was made available with the financial support of the Culture Programme (2007-2013) of the European Union. Curiously, so does another English classic, Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, also published in 2008 with the support of the Culture Programme of the EU and, once again, translated by Milen Ruskov.

The Bulgarian edition of the three translated tales, originally launched in *The Keepsake*, is a contribution to Mary Shelley's reception in this country. The approach to the visual materials, however, is certainly not academic, as the publisher did not make an effort to distinguish established facts from unverified claims. The short bio at the end of the volume brings her publications into the limelight, naturally emphasising the birth of *Frankenstein*, but also listing her major novels and mentioning the tales. It

does, however, introduce a political slant as well: the concluding remark asserts that she died, having reassessed many of her radical opinions. The bio is not signed, which obfuscates the selective method and implies an objective representation. Unlike the communist-time publications, no ideological restraints are supposed to have hovered over it, but the 1981 and 1986 biographical introductions to *Frankenstein* appear more personal. The back cover is styled according to the established bookselling practice, featuring the best known photo of the author, a blurb about her talents, and advertising comments on her work. The overall impression is that the choices made in this edition are meant to sell the book rather than keep up the high standards associated with literary connoisseurship as declared on the publisher's web page.

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