

Poetics peculiarity of mary shelley's 'tales and stories'

Mary Shelley has been remembered chiefly as the author of *Frankenstein* and the wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley. In his short introduction and notes, Charles E. Robinson provides a critical appreciation and elucidation of the tales. Most of Mary Shelley's short narratives were first published in *The Keepsake*, the most enduring (1828 – 57) and popular of the nineteenth-century annual gift books. *The Keepsake* published the most celebrated writers of the age, among them Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Scott, Dickens, Tennyson. The tales abound in highly dramatic situations. A bastard brother usurps the place of a nobleman, condemning the legitimate brother to the galleys. To avoid being shot, a girl changes clothes with her sister, a nun, and inherits with the nun's habit a lifetime of seclusion behind convent walls. In order to dream about the future, a heroine dares to sleep on the St. Catherine's couch, a narrow ledge of rock hanging precipitously over the raging winter torrent of the Loire. Lovers wend their star-crossed way to blissful union or eternal despair. Brigands, pirates, smugglers, distressed damsels, darkly ambitious villains, and knights *sans peur et sans reproche* crowd thickly over the pages. Yet Mary Shelley's intense and incandescent writing easily persuades the reader to a willing suspension of disbelief. Many of the tales have overtones of science fiction. A seventeenth-century Englishman, Mr. Dodsworth, buried in a glacier, is reanimated more than a century later to confront a vastly changed world. A man in whom the aging process has been suspended by alchemy encounters, is not an immortal bliss, but he has to suffer all the torments of living with a wife who ages into a querulous, jealous old woman while he remains young and handsome. Perhaps the most gripping account of transformation occurs when a rash young man trades bodies with a misshapen dwarf. His sense of horror as he perceives his new, grotesque shadow with its long spidery arms is chillingly conveyed. Springing from the cultural matrix of English Romanticism the tales reveal the new sensibility of the age – the overflowing emotion, the enthrallment with legend and romance.