



VALENTINA CASTAGNA

# Shape-Shifting Tales

Michèle Roberts's Monstrous Women

Peter Lang

This book provides an analysis of the representation of women's bodies and their monstrous metamorphoses in selected short stories by contemporary English writer Michèle Roberts. The author explores the relationship between traditional fairy tales such as the Grimm Brothers' and Charles Perrault's, the lives of female saints and Roberts's counter-narratives, focussing on the analysis of images of sublimed fleshliness and of acts of monstrous violence on the body. The book takes into account relevant Women's Studies criticism regarding the mother-daughter relationship, as Roberts's stories question the role of mother figures in traditional fairy tales and hagiography and at the same time rework the concept of motherhood itself.

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*To my family*



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# Introduction

*Fairy tales give women a place from which to speak, but they sometimes speak of speechlessness as a weapon of last resort<sup>1</sup>.*

Folk and fairy tales, as well as the lives of saints, have always had a powerful common hold on readers and listeners of all ages. The characters are mostly defined within real family relationships, since one can find daughters, fathers, sons and mothers inspiring the young reader to identify with heroes and heroines; however their supernatural representation of the body surviving any kind of maiming violence and monstrous metamorphosis, results in images of sublimed fleshliness, where the danger of corruption remains more acute on a moral basis than on a physical one. Feminist literary criticism regarding fairy tales and feminist writers reworking them, have both pointed out how these stories have contributed to spreading the stereotype of either passive female subjects in need of male control (with absent, ill or dead mothers) or wicked witches (generally identified with stepmothers)<sup>2</sup>.

This work focuses on the relationship between monstrosity and the characters of mothers and daughters in the short stories of the English writer Michèle Roberts (1949), based on a critical reworking of folk tales, fairy tales and hagiography from women's perspectives. Her short stories "Anger" (1988), "The Life of Saint Christine", "The Life of Saint Agnes" (included in the novel *Impos-*

1 M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde. On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xxi.

2 The debate on this topic developed mainly in the first decades of Western second wave feminism.