

## Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses*: Different Forms of Travel in Victorian Children's Literature \*

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### Resumen:

Este artículo afirma que el interés victoriano por la reescritura de la literatura infantil va de la mano con su interés por la narrativa de viajes y de aventuras. Con la interpretación de diferentes formas de reescritura y de viajes, la edad de oro de la literatura infantil pone en relación el pasado y el presente. Dado que, tanto el acto de reescribir como el del viaje se encuentran en un lugar *entremedias* —entre pasado y presente, cerca y lejos, el texto original y su adaptación—, sugiero que la reescritura y el viaje colaboran en la narrativa infantil a la representación de la mujer errante e irónica. La primera parte del artículo describe la tradición de la narración y la adaptación de la literatura infantil y sugiere que la narrativa para niños sigue un patrón similar al de la novela de formación femenina: ambos desafían la versión masculina y colonial del momento. La segunda parte se centra en Christina Rossetti y su obra para niños *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), que destaca entre los demás ejemplos de la época, y explica por qué es una narración única con respecto a la literatura de fantasía similar. La última sección presenta una lectura atenta de *Speaking Likenesses* y los diferentes tipos de viajes en narrativa. Centrándose en cuatro formas diferentes de viajar dentro de la narración, este artículo afirma que los diferentes tipos de viajes y las reescrituras son interdependientes y que funcionan juntos con el fin de revelar la tendencia victoriana a acortar la distancia entre el pasado y el presente.

**Palabras clave:** Christina Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, literatura infantil victoriana, adaptación, intertextualidad, motivo del viaje, tradición épica, ironía, Odisea.

### Abstract:

This article claims that the Victorian focus on rewriting in children's literature works together with the Victorian interest in adventurous travel narratives. With the portrayal of different forms of rewriting and travel, Golden Age of children's literature brings together past and present. Since both the act of rewriting and travel signal an in-between position – among past and present, home and away, the source-text and its adaptation-, I suggest that rewriting and travel collaborate in children's narratives through the depiction of the ironic female wanderer. The first part of the article discusses the tradition of story-telling and adaptation in children's literature and suggests that children's narratives follow a similar pattern to that of the female *Bildungsroman* in that they both defy the masculinist, colonialist accounts of the period. The second part focuses on Christina Rossetti and her children's book *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), which stands out among the other examples of the period and explains why it is a unique narrative among other similar fantasy literature. The last section lays out a close reading of *Speaking Likenesses* and the different modes of travel in the narrative. Focusing on four different forms of travel within the narrative, this article claims that the different kinds of travel and rewriting are mutually dependent and they function together so as to reveal the Victorian tendency to bridge the gap between past and present.

**Key words:** Christina Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, Victorian children's literature, adaptation, intertextuality, travel motif, epic tradition, irony, Odyssey.

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The Victorian period, the “Golden Age” of children’s literature, witnesses a proliferation of fantasy and a retelling of adventures. The prevailing plot in fantastical adventures is a quest by a child or adolescent, similar to the quests by epic heroes such as Odysseus or Sinbad, although it is also often ironic. In *Children’s Literature from Aesop to Harry Potter*, Seth Lerer says children’s literature “re-tells a history of the conventions of interpretation and the reception of texts in different historical periods” (2008: 3-4). Children’s literature inevitably involves an act of re-telling since it turns the conventions upside down and challenges limits of normalcy.

The traditions of story-telling and adaptation in children’s literature bear similarities to Victorian female *Bildungsroman* in that they frequently embrace a female wanderer who engages in a quasi-epic adventure with realistic as well as fantastical dimensions<sup>1</sup>. As in the *Bildungsroman*, Victorian children’s texts center on the figure of an adolescent female wanderer whose journey is metatextual, with ironic intertextual references to schoolroom classics about male voyagers who recount their adventures, such as the *Odyssey* and the *Arabian Nights*. Similar to Odysseus, there have been a number of female travelers in fairy tales and classical mythology such as Medea, Psyche, and Little Red Riding Hood. However, unlike Odysseus, they rarely tell their stories on their return. Their experience of travel does not include a retrospective aspect. It can be argued that the female wanderer figure in Victorian children’s literature starts with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* books. Carroll’s *Alice* provides a substantial example for the ironic female wanderer figure and bears some parallelism with Homer’s epic in terms of an obsession with eating, power relations, and fantastical elements (Nicholson, 1987: 42). Not only Carroll is inspired by former texts but also his *Alice* books inspired numerous adaptations in the second half of nineteenth century. These adaptations have a double purpose: to imitate and satirize the masculine epic tradition and to critique the female wanderer figure in Victorian female *Bildungsroman*.

This article claims that the Victorian focus on rewriting in children’s literature works together with the Victorian interest in adventurous travel narratives. With the portrayal of different forms of rewriting and travel, Golden Age of children’s literature brings together past and present. This retrospective aspect not only reveals the Victorian interest in the classics but also provides a critical perspective on the masculine epic tradition and adventure stories and a social critique for the condition of Victorian women. Since both the act of rewriting and travel signal an in-between position —among past and present, home and away, the source-text and its adaptation—, I suggest that rewriting and travel collaborate in children’s narratives through the depiction of the ironic female wanderer. The first part of the article discusses the tradition of

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<sup>1</sup> See Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), Olive Schreiner’s *Undine* (1929), *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853) and Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894).

story-telling and adaptation in children's literature and suggests that children's narratives follow a similar pattern to that of the female *Bildungsroman* in that they both defy the masculinist, colonialist accounts of the period. The second part focuses on Christina Rossetti and her children's book *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), which stands out among the other examples of the period and explains why it is a unique narrative among other similar fantasy literature. Finally, the last section lays out a more detailed discussion of *Speaking Likenesses* and the different modes of travel in the narrative. Focusing on four different forms of travel within the narrative, the last part also claims that the different kinds of travel and rewriting are mutually dependent and they function together so as to reveal the Victorian tendency to bridge the gap between past and present.

### **1. Motif of Travel and Adaptation in Victorian Children's Literature**

Along with a dramatic rise in bourgeois literacy, the study of Greek and Latin and the interest in classical literature increase in nineteenth-century Victorian England. There is a deliberate attempt to imitate the Greek forms and writing during the period. The best examples of this interest or inspiration are revealed in the dramatic monologues of Alfred Lord Tennyson, the poems and paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and critical works by Matthew Arnold<sup>2</sup>. David Adams claims that admiration for Greeks is also reflected in the Victorian adventure novels that carry masculine and colonialist undercurrents. The model of ancient Greece revives at the peak of British colonial power in the nineteenth century, because it "evokes the same exoticism and confidence as empire" (Adams, 2003: 20). In *Colonial Odysseys*, Adams points out parallel links among Odysseus, Victorian adventure stories and British imperialism. He states:

British alliance with Greek civilization and admiration of Greek primitivism, contradictory though they may seem, both serve to encourage and legitimize Britain's imperial endeavors. The encouragement and legitimization are acts not merely in relation to the colonies but in relation to Western culture (Adams, 2003: 20).

The proliferation of what Adams calls "the colonial-odyssey novels" in the nineteenth century aim to mimic Homer and to prevent a sense of disenchantment with British imperialist ideology<sup>3</sup>. He argues that the interest in the classics finds a new venue and becomes a propagandistic site for the expansion of the colonial interests of the period. Adams brings a different perspective to the Victorian interest in the classical Greece by establishing a link between classical epics running from Homer to Vergil to Dante and the emergence of adventure novels. His idea also paves the way for a fresh understanding of modeling Greek patterns, which

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<sup>2</sup> See "Ulysses", "Tithonus", and "Lotos Eaters" by A. L. Tennyson; *Proserphina* by D. G. Rossetti; *Culture and Anarchy*, "Preface to Poems", and "The Study of Poetry" by M. Arnold.

<sup>3</sup> In the book, David Adams gives Henry Rider Haggard's *She*, and *King's Solomon's Mines*, and Robert Luis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* as examples of colonial odyssey novels.

has to do with imperialist ideology. In addition to privileged male intellectual activity, he adds the colonialist agenda as one of the initiators of the Victorian admiration of Greek culture. As he re-names the adventure novels as “Victorian Odysseys”, his discussion revolves around the rewriting of the male epic heroes such as Odysseus, Aeneas and Dante and the male Victorian writers who label the concept of the quest and adventure as a male, colonialist activity<sup>4</sup>. This article looks at adventure and quest stories similar to those that Adams pinpoints. However, it focuses on the experiences of the Victorian female voyager, who represents the ironic re-working of the male epic hero.

It has been argued that there is no clear-cut distinction between the Victorian female *Bildungsroman* and children’s literature and that they can be replaced by one another. (Honig, 1988: 8; Talairach-Vielmas, 2007: 1). Edith Honig points out that Victorian adult novels written about women carry fairy tale qualities and fantasy becomes the key tool to “break the angelic image” in the Victorian society (1988: 3-4)<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, Talairach-Vielmas argues that these two genres work together to challenge the objectified position of the women and to resist Victorian commodity culture (2007: 7). By rewriting of the female story-teller figure, both genres defy the stereotypical images and attempt to re-locate the canon. In this paper, I claim that in challenging of the Victorian paradigm of the angel in the house, the re-worked female wanderer figure has as much impact as the story-teller.

In relation to fantasy literature’s link to adult novels, Knoepfmacher argues that there are two types of readers, adult and child, in Victorian children’s literature (1983: 500). Victorian fantasy literature is written for two different readerships and by the adult writer who is almost haunted by past and childhood. Emphasizing Victorians’ interest in nostalgia and their retrospective ambition, he writes: “It is no coincidence that the self-divided Victorians who found themselves ‘wandering between two worlds’ in their Janus-like split between progress and nostalgia should have produced what has rightly been called ‘the Golden Age of children’s books’” [my emphasis] (1983: 497). His argument on the retrospective aspect of children’s literature highlights the Victorian interest in looking back and trying to understand the past as well. Victorian children’s literature is one of the vehicles in which the Victorians attempt to balance between the adult and the child, realism and fantasy, past and future, and nostalgia and progress. In this act of juxtaposing two worlds, the genre has the retrospective aspect of looking at the past and thus rewrites previous fairy tales and adventure stories. Victorian fantasy literature may re-work well-known fairy tales, as in E. Nesbit’s *Melisande* or Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that in *Colonial Odysseys*, Adams also discusses Virginia Woolf in the chapters on modernism. However, his discussion of “Victorian Odysseys” focuses on male writers only.

<sup>5</sup> In “Introduction: Literary Fairy Tales and the Value of Impurity”, U.C. Knoepfmacher claims that Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* are the two major examples of novels that bear fairy tale qualities. They have an impact on the popularity of the adaptations and translations of fairy tales (23). A similar argument has been frequently made for Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Notsu (2006) and Sullivan (1978).

*Cindrella*, or it may adapt contemporary literature as seen in the numerous *Alice in Wonderland* adaptations of the period (Sigler, 1997).

The Golden Age of children's literature witnessed a proliferation of works with child protagonists, girls with distinct identity and agency, and fantastic journeys that foster their independence. In his introduction to *Secret Gardens*, Humphrey Carpenter gives a general outline of the age by briefly mentioning distinctive examples from nineteenth-century Britain. By making a further link between the Victorian novel and children's literature, he claims that the emergence of adult novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in the mid-nineteenth century contributed to the changing image of the child during the period (1985: 9). Spurred by the popularity of Carroll's Alice books and their influence on new conceptions of childhood, children's literature becomes a significant and influential genre (Carpenter, 1985: 10). Thanks to her fantastical journeys, the adolescent heroine becomes independent and resembles the protagonist of the Victorian female *Bildungsroman*.

Two crucial features mark Victorian fantasy literature: wandering and rewriting. The motif of wandering may take the form of a fantastical and an imaginative journey, usually in the mind of the female protagonist. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the idea of journey is not linear but episodic: it takes detours into fantastical elements. The linearity of the journey is disrupted when Alice, for instance, metamorphosizes, experiences adventures with talking animals, and encounters the rabbit in a rush. Starting with Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* books, Victorian children's literature sees the emergence of the figure of the female adolescent wanderer and adventurer. The legacy of Carroll's books legitimizes and popularizes the female wanderer figure. Using the words "adventurer" and "traveler" interchangeably, Roderick McGillis claims that the adventurer or the traveler always goes through a subversive experience by challenging the expectations that we all agree characterize society (1983: 18). After going through a new fantastical experience, the figure of the female wanderer adjusts herself to new circumstances. He writes: "There will be Wonderland, the zany, the mad, the anarchic 'other' world where above-ground certainties, social niceties, rules of decorum and, adult preoccupation with hierarchy, prestige, and justice are turned upside down" (McGillis, 1983: 20). Therefore, the motif of wandering always involves elements of fantasy, as in *The Odyssey*, and a state of open-mindedness for the re-establishment of social rules and for the adjustment to the new other world. In other words, as the traveler goes on an adventure, she not only *adapts* to the new uncanny world but also *rewrites* the conventions of her own society by bridging the gap between her old familiar world and her newly-familiarized world. As she travels, she rewrites herself as the bearer of new social constructions as well.

The second trait of Victorian children's literature is the use of metatextuality. Carroll incorporates intertextual elements with ironic echoes of nursery rhymes and school geography. As Knoepflmacher has argued, Victorians had a tendency to bring together past and present. In

this period, the nostalgic Victorian quest for a mythic past is replaced by a fantastical quest done by a usually female wanderer. As the Victorians want to re-create a past, they make use of metatextual tools in their writing. Similarly, Knoepfmacher stresses that children's literature retrospectively looks back at previous texts as well. In "Retellings across Time and Cultures", John Stephens discusses the cultural significance of re-tellings of fairy tales. He writes: "Traditional stories are thought to facilitate intercultural communication by bringing out the similarities between various world cultures, and hence to affirm the common humanity of the world's peoples" (Stephens, 2009: 94). Victorian fantasy literature aims to bridge this gap between past and present by utilizing metatextual techniques and adapting from well-known fairy tales and contemporary examples of children's literature. These two significant characteristics of Victorian children's literature, the quest for adventure and the metatextual narrative, collaborate and support one another.

The emerging figure of the female wanderer in nineteenth-century literature first appears in Carroll's two Alice books. The Alice books have a strong impact not only changing the traditional child image but also challenging the social conventions by making Alice wander through unfamiliar land. Among the various similar books of Victorian literature, Alice has a certain legacy as the leading figure of the female wanderer. She stands out as the first female Odysseus and rewrites the conventions of a male epic in the nineteenth century. The first edition was published in 2000 copies, and the Alice books quickly became a part of Victorian commodity culture. This new female figure, who challenges the old world and rewrites a new one, becomes so popular and canonical that imitating Alice turns into another trend (Feldmann, 1996: 113; Sigler, 1998: 355). Starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, literary and later cinematic adaptations of Alice have pervaded the literary arena.

In *Alternative Alices*, Carolyn Sigler lists five notable nineteenth century examples of Alice adaptations: *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869) by Jean Ingelow, *Amelia and the Dwarfs* (1870) by Juliana Horatia Ewing, *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) by Christina Rossetti, *Behind the White Brick* (1879) by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and *Wanted —a King; or, How Merle Set the Nursery Rhymes to Right* (1890) by Maggie Browne<sup>6</sup>. The books by Rossetti, Browne, and Ewing are manifest adaptations of Alice, in which the female protagonist goes through a fantastical, imaginary journey. There are specific allusions to Alice such as the Birthday Queen of *Speaking Likenesses*, who resembles the Queen of Hearts of *Alice in Wonderland*. However, in the case of Ingelow and Burnett, the Alice allusion is more elusive. In *Mopsa the Fairy*, it is a male hero rather than a female who experiences a journey and *Behind the White Brick* is the short

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to Sigler's list of Alice-inspired fantasy literature, I will add Augusta Webster's *Daffodil and Croaxaxicans* (1884) and Dollie Radford's *Sea-Thrift* (1904). Other Victorian rewritings of fairy tales include *Cinderella* by Anne Ritchie Thackeray (1868), *Melisande* by E. Nesbit (1901), and *All My Doing or Red Riding-Hood Over Again* by Harriet Louisa Childe-Pemberton (1882).

fantastical voyage of a girl who goes behind the fireplace brick. What is common in these five adaptations is the motif of wandering blended with uncanny adventures. Seth Lerer underscores “queer” as the key word for Carroll’s Alice (2008: 195). With the help of irony, parody and language games, Carroll aims to extend the boundaries of normalcy (Lerer, 2008: 196). In a similar fashion, what brings together the Alice adaptations of the period is their defiant stance towards conventions and normalcy. Just as in the Alice books, these adaptations leave the beaten path through the use of imagination, parody and word games.

Among these numerous examples, I will analyze Christina Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses*, since it displays the journeys of female wanderers not only through its adaptation of Alice but also its re-working of fairy tales such as “The sad story of Pauline and the Matches” and “Little Red Riding Hood”. Unlike the other Alice adaptations of the Victorian period, Rossetti’s narrative does not appear to direct the theme of rewriting at a single source. Rather, it focuses on different forms of metatextuality (adaptations, irony, intratextual references and intertextuality) and blends together its form (reworking) with its content (metaphor of travel). The following section locates Christina Rossetti and *Speaking Likenesses* within the tradition of Victorian children’s literature.

## **2. Christina Rossetti and *Speaking Likenesses***

Although unknown to the general reading public, Rossetti has a number of children’s books and narratives, which are not as canonized as her poetry. Rossetti today figures in all anthologies of Victorian poetry, but she is often read as very feminine with an emphasis on her spirituality. The best-known examples of her children’s narratives are *Goblin Market*, *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses* although *Speaking Likenesses* never became popular until Auerbach & Knoepfmacher’s anthology *Forbidden Journeys* (Briggs, 1999: 213). Her children’s narratives are never simple stories; rather, they become complex with her inclusion of fairy tales, symbols, and nursery rhymes (McGillis, 1987: 229). Besides, very few critics really acknowledge *Goblin Market* as a children’s book (McGillis, 1987: 209; Connor, 1984: 443). In the less canonical works for children such as *Nick*, *Hero*, *Prince’s Progress* and *Maude*, Rossetti brings together elements of fantasy and realism as well. Following the post-Alice tradition, she is interested in the female odyssey in *Hero*, *Speaking Likenesses* and partly in *Goblin Market* and *Maude*. In addition to the female wandering heroines of *Speaking Likenesses* (Flora, Edith and Maggie) and of *Hero* (Hero), Laura and Lizzy in *Goblin Market* go on an adventurous and tempting journey, which ends up depriving of the pleasures they seek. These wandering female heroes of Rossetti’s children’s narratives, it can be argued, follow the post-Alice tradition discussed in the first section. However, unlike the fantastical, magical and happy-ending stories that follow the Alice books, Rossetti’s narratives carry resentment and pessimism that blend the adventurous journey with a realistic home-coming. In Rossetti’s odysseys, the journey is never completely a

fantasy, but rather it is a fantasy that wanders toward realism. It is a journey that ends with deprivation, loss of innocence, and childhood. In this paper, I argue that Rossetti's children's literature —especially *Speaking Likenesses*— is an example of this post-Alice and post-Homeric tradition of the Victorian era.

The major influence on Rossetti's writing was her interest in classical Greek mythology and philosophy (Bellas, 1977: 18). Similar to her Victorian contemporaries who admired past writers, Rossetti was also interested in Dante and Dantean intertextuality. She reconciles the realistic with the spiritual, pessimism with optimism (Bellas, 1977: 31). Although the concept of childhood traditionally represents innocence and perfection or an idyllic naivety, the pessimistic events haunt Rossetti's child protagonists (female wanderers). In a similar way, with her Dantean intertextuality, she claims to bridge the gap between Dante and her contemporaries, aligning with the Victorian trend of the reconciliation of past and present. In relation to the major influences on Rossetti, Constance Hassett lists ancient (Homer and Dante) and contemporary (Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans) writers on Rossetti's writing in *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (2005: 99-102).

*Speaking Likenesses* was written in 1874 with the title "Nowhere" for Macmillan. It was the first book that made Rossetti return to Macmillan after working with other publishers (Kooistra, 2002: 126). Later on, she changed the title to *Speaking Likenesses* since the title is reminiscent of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) (Briggs, 1999: 215). In her letter to Alexander Macmillan, she writes: "Thank you cordially for my book which pleases me much, & of which your gift of 6 copies was most welcome. I only hope the public appetite will not be satisfied with 6 or 60, but crave on for 600 or 6000 at least!" (Rossetti, 1999: 30). As many critics also agree, she writes *Speaking Likenesses* for the buying public and as a contribution to the post-Alice books. Moreover, in a letter dated January 26, 1875, she explains her joy in the recent sales of the book (Rossetti, 1999: 38). Different from her other books, she clearly wrote for the public being aware of the popularity of the Alice adaptations. As an adaptation of a popular book, *Speaking Likenesses* aims to reach a wider audience and attempts a similar popularity. By no means, then, does Rossetti want to write an original literary work, but rather she deliberately follows the Alice and the Homeric tradition so as to be read by many people. Rossetti is partly concerned with the popularity and the canonicity of the previous narratives.

*Speaking Likenesses* opens with an elderly aunt who, upon the request of her five nieces, sits down and tells three stories to them. However, she not only knits as she tells but also asks her nieces to engage in a similar labor as they hear the stories. The first story is about an eight-year old girl, Flora, who gets prepared for her wonderful birthday party. As the rewriting of Alice, Flora finds herself in an uncanny world of moving furniture, talking animals and a frustrated queen. The second story is the rewriting of "The tragic story of Pauline and the Matches" from *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845) by Heinrich Hoffman. Unlike Flora, Edith, the protagonist of the



second story, does not go through a physical or a fantastical journey. With the help of talking animals, she attempts to accomplish a task, which ends in failure. The last story, the story of Maggie, is the Victorian adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Briggs & Butts, 1995: 144). In this sad winter story, Maggie journeys to deliver a package, then returns to her warm home. The book ends with Maggie's homecoming without referring back to the aunt and nieces.

The centrality of the female protagonists who in many instances must thwart or resist an antagonist who impedes her journey has attracted a number of critics to this book. Knoepfmacher reads the antagonisms in the text as a manifestation of Rossetti's resistance to Lewis Carroll. The specificity of each girl's tests allows us to see Rossetti's goals in adapting her plots from writers like Carroll. Despite the fact that each critic focuses on a different aspect of the book, all of them briefly touch upon the feminist undercurrents in the book<sup>7</sup>. In addition to the feminist readings, Anna Silver, Claire Senior and Auerbach and Knoepfmacher make connections between Rossetti's interest in spirituality and the journeys that take place in the narrative. Moreover, Maggie stands out not only as a spiritual character but also as the only poor girl coming from lower class in the class-based/Marxist criticisms of Julia Briggs and Anna Despotopoulou. Last but not least, *Speaking Likenesses* is interpreted as a derivative work that constantly rewrites previous texts. Knoepfmacher defines *Speaking Likenesses* as "an antagonistic work" (1986: 311; 1998: 357).

Building on the previous criticism, I will argue that the travel motif goes hand in hand with the metatextual aspect of the book. They are inseparable from each other in Rossetti's narrative. Through the inclusion of different forms of travel, the concept of voyage is rewritten just like the stories and fairy tales re-worked in the book. With the help of story-telling and intertextuality, not only the travels of the three protagonists but also the fictional wandering of the nieces are revealed. The act of story-telling involves an act of wandering through time, space and stories in *Speaking Likenesses*. The following section provides a close reading of the three stories and analyzes the links between adaptation and travel.

### **3. From Fantasy to Realism: Rewriting of Travel**

*Speaking Likenesses* starts with a dedication to Rossetti's mother "in grateful remembrance of the stories which she used to entertain her children" (1874: v). Right from the beginning, there is an emphasis on story-telling and re-telling of tales. The opening lines of the book are like a call for all the girls who wish to wander among stories: "Come sit round me, my dear little girls, and I will tell you a story" (1874: 1). Asking them to bring work with them, the elderly aunt aims to engage the nieces in work and story-telling and begins narrating the story of Flora on her eighth birthday.

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<sup>7</sup> Talairach-Vielmas (2007), Knoepfmacher (1986 and 1998) Briggs (1999), Silver, (1997) Despotopoulou (2010), Smulders, (1996).

Flora's story opens in an idyllic atmosphere. On her eighth birthday, she is described as a healthy and a beautiful girl (1874: 4). After the description of the beautiful day, Rossetti then gives a long list of her presents and the preparations for the big birthday party she will be having with her friends (1874: 4-5). However, the picture-perfect atmosphere turns to be upside down when the uninvited guest Serena comes with Flora's cousin and the food at the table is not as tasty as it looks (1974: 6-8). Dissatisfied with her birthday party, Flora walks down the alley towards darkness and finds herself in the world of moving furniture, a birthday party full of staring boys and girls, an assertive birthday queen, cruel playmates, and a large party table forbidden to her. As Flora goes into this new world, she has to adjust herself to the new circumstances: "Of these remarkable details some struck Flora in the first few minutes after her arrival, some came to light as time went on" (1874: 18). In the case of Flora, travel signals an encounter with the other and the uncanny world. Losing her confidence and initial assertiveness, Flora acts differently in this fantasy world. Her encounter with the other situates her in a new position in which she is 'othered' by the majority: "Every single boy and every single girl stared hard at Flora and went on staring; but not one of them offered her a chair, or a cup of tea, or anything else whatever. She grew very red and uncomfortable under so many pairs of staring eyes" (1874: 22). With the imagery of the reflections of mirrors in the party room, her birthday party in the real world is juxtaposed to the similar uncanny birthday party in the fantasy world (1874: 24). Flora has to learn the rules of the unfamiliar games such as "Hunt the Pincushion" and "Self Help". Her voyage in the fantasy land comes to an end when all the other guests of the party build a house around Flora increasing the nightmarish aspect of her dream (1874: 40).

Throughout this exploration, Flora encounters with the unfamiliar, tries to adapt to the new environment and learns a lesson. Her adventure-seeking side diminishes and she turns into a home-seeking wanderer. Like the centripetal hero of David Adams<sup>8</sup>, she turns from a Homeric epic heroine into a Dantean hero whose homecoming story overshadows the adventure-seeking part (Adams, 2003: 26-7). After breaking the walls of the brick house, she is happy to be back at home (Rossetti, 1874: 47). For Flora, the feeling of familiarity and the loss of discomfort are what matters at the end of the travel.

Edith's expedition is apparently very different from those of Flora's and Maggie's. Unlike the other two protagonists, she neither goes on a fantastical journey nor walks through a forest to complete a task. In line with Flora's story, Edith's story opens with an idyllic beginning in which the table is set with lots of food for an afternoon party: "The loving mother had planned a treat for her family that afternoon. A party of friends and relations were to assemble in the beech-wood, and partake of a gypsy-tea" (1874: 52). As the servants and the cook are busy with

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<sup>8</sup> Centripetal and centrifugal heroes represent the home-seeking and adventure-seeking heroes, respectively. According to Adams, Odysseus is both a centrifugal and a centripetal epic hero whereas Vergil's Aeneas and Dante are centripetal heroes only.

preparing the food for the party, Edith takes out the kettle into the woods so as to light the fire and boil water for the tea. By contrast to the physical or imaginary explorations of Flora and Maggie, Edith remains almost static. Her only short physical wandering occurs when she goes to the forest and attempts to light a fire with her animal friends. In the case of Edith, the beech-wood, although it is by the side of the house, represents the adventure-seeker/home-deserter side of Edith. Being in purgatory, she does not really complete her journey. Unlike Flora, she does not utilize her imagination in this journey nor does she abandon home completely. Since the beech-wood is right by her house, Edith does not go further away home.

Accompanied by a group of animals, Edith attempts twice to strike the matches, but fails. Edith's awareness of her failed journey suggests her psychological maturation bringing her closer to the protagonist of Victorian female *Bildungsroman* where women go through a process of growing. However, as an ironic reading of Victorian *Bildungsroman*, Edith's story does not end in achievement: "Edith's situation had now become, as it seems to me, neither pleasant nor dignified. She had volunteered to boil a kettle, and could not succeed even in lighting a fire. Her relations, friends, and other natural enemies, would be arriving, and would triumph over her" (1874: 60). Due to her failure at the end, she has to re-adjust and re-define herself as a girl or an adolescent. Edith lives through neither the hellish nightmare of Flora nor the utopic heavenly home-coming of Maggie. However, Edith is revealed as the incapable little girl who cannot even light a fire and her position becomes more ironic when we keep in mind the capable and mature protagonists of female novels of education such as *Aurora Leigh* and *Jane Eyre*.

Out of the three wandering heroines of Rossetti, Maggie is the most heroic, in that she goes on a physical journey full of temptations yet successfully returns home. As Despotopoulou and Briggs argue, she stands out as the only poor heroine and the best-behaved (Briggs, 1999: 217; Despotopoulou, 2010: 416-7). Helping her adoptive grandmother Old Dame Margaret in her shop, Maggie volunteers to go to a doctor's house to take the parcels that his young ladies left behind (1874: 74). Despite her grandmother's reluctance to send her into the dark woods, Maggie is motivated to take the journey in order to see the Christmas tree in the doctor's house. However, her voyage includes a set of temptations and risks. On her way, she sees a group of girls and boys playing a game, the "Mouth-Boy", who begs for food from her basket (1874: 84) and a group of sleeping people. Disregarding all the temptations, she finally arrives at the doctor's house, where she is disillusioned by the brief "thank you", and returns home without seeing the Christmas tree. On her return journey, she rescues a pigeon, a kitten and a puppy and becomes a surrogate parent for the dying animals just as her caring grandmother did for her. Like Flora, she is welcomed back in her house (1874: 94). When she accomplishes the task and returns victoriously, the frame tale (the aunt and the five nieces) becomes redundant since the home-coming of the epic heroine is sufficient for an ending of the book.

In contrast to Flora and Edith, Maggie stands out as a Homeric hero since her journey scheme displays parallelism to the epic hero. First, she willingly goes for a quest and looks for adventure. Despite the home-seeker aspect of Odysseus, his deliberate stray from home and thirst for adventure are apparent when he boldly tells his real name to Polyphemus and listens to the Sirens. Secondly, Maggie overcomes the temptations: the children playing Self Help, the Mouth Boy, and the sleeping people. The second and the third distractions of Maggie are analogous to the greed of Cyclops and the drowsiness of Lotus-Eaters in the *Odyssey*, respectively. Finally, she finishes the task and returns home victoriously like a Greek soldier who won glory at Trojan War. As Flora and Edith become aware of an unfamiliar uncanny world, Maggie actually lives through it. Out of these three travelers, Maggie is the only one who is rewarded for her sense of duty (Marsh, 1994: 422). The grandmother welcomes Maggie, and together with the animals she has saved, they make a happy family in line with Odysseus's reunion with his *oikos*.

In addition to the imaginary voyage of Flora, Edith's journey towards maturation and Maggie's physical expedition in the forest, there is a fourth type of travel in *Speaking Likenesses*. The five nieces wander through the stories as the aunt narrates them. With their comments and questions about the stories, they help the aunt re-write the stories, lessening her authority as the story-teller. Moreover, the aunt does not allow them to sit idly and listen. She demands them to be active story-listeners and go on this metaphorical journey together with her. As they ask her to tell—or rather rewrite—Susan's story, she replies: "I will try, on condition you all help me with my sewing" (1874: 49). As she takes them to three different settings, the nieces are willing to voyage through the lives of Flora, Edith, and Maggie.

In addition to this, the nieces/readers are demanding. They have the power to partially control and divert the stories. Despite the criticism on the pre-dominance of the aunt as the story-teller, I would suggest that the nieces have some control as the burgeoning writers of the tales (1874: 8, 49, 70). For instance, after Flora's story, they demand their aunt tell the story of the frog that Susan tells—but we do not hear—to the attendees of Flora's birthday party. When she objects that she does not know the story, the nieces tell her to try as if they already know that she will make up the stories anyway: "Oh, but you know it, Aunt,... try. You know, Aunt, you are always telling *us* to try" (1874: 49). They are the ones who point out that the playing children in the forest in Maggie's story are the same cruel children in Flora's nightmare (1874: 78, 81). Likewise, they ask for a winter story after the story of Edith, commenting that the stories of Flora and Edith stories similar (1874: 70). Thus, upon the request of the readers, the story-teller narrates a very different story from the other two. In that sense, the readers/nieces share the authority to narrate and rewrite the story together with the aunt. Their exploration among the stories is never an idle journey but a creative one. The use of subversive and metanarrative

strategies represent the core of the narrative by emphasizing the unoriginality of *Speaking Likenesses* (Salerno, 2001: 77).

In *Speaking Likenesses*, there are four modes of travel that re-define the concept of wandering. With Flora, the journey starts in a fantasy land. However, as we end up with Maggie's story, there is a more realistic tone. Through Maggie, the reader also completes her journey from fantasy to realism. Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher tend to read *Speaking Likenesses* as a spiritual text in which the characters go through a symbolic mystical travel. In the preface, they interpret the three wanderers as going through the Dantean intertextual journey; that is, Flora finds herself in hell, Edith represents purgatory, and Maggie reaches heaven (1992: 319). The reader, then —just like the nieces— goes through a metaphorical journey of listening and contributing to the stories. The expedition of the audience reveals the metatextual aspect of the narrative. The fictionality of the narratives becomes apparent as the nieces come to realize that the aunt actually makes the stories up. Also, as the aunt asks them to engage in any kind of labor (sewing, mending, etc.), they foreground their own creativity more than feminine procreativity. Not only do the nieces work as they listen but also they contribute to the story with their comments and questions and rewrite it at the same time.

There is a strong juxtaposition between creative and procreative capabilities of women in *Speaking Likenesses*. As the aunt aims to bolster the creativity of her nieces, the procreative abilities seem to diminish. Smulders claims that the elderly aunt has no longer her procreative capabilities (1996: 121-122). Given that the readers are also still adolescents, they foreground their burgeoning power of story-telling as opposed to their immature bodies. Throughout *Speaking Likenesses*, the creativity and the act of re-telling trumps the procreative powers of the protagonists. In line with the juxtaposition of creativity and procreativity, there is a strong emphasis on orphanhood and adoption in the narrative. For instance, there is no direct mother-daughter relationship between the aunt and the nieces. Except for Flora's, we do not see the mothers of the characters. The final story underlines that the blood relationship is not necessary as Maggie is adopted by Old Dame Margaret and she adopts the orphan animals on her way back home. *Speaking Likenesses* uses this emphasis on non-blood relations and applies them to the stories as well. As there is no real mother-daughter relationship in the book except for Flora's, there is no definite pre-text and adaptation relation as well. For example, instead of a mother-daughter relationship, there are bonds between aunt-nieces, adoptive grandmother-orphan granddaughter, nurse-girl, sister-sister. The relations are more diverse but are in no way weaker than the mother-daughter relationship. I suggest that this idea is also apparent in the narrative's treatment of previous stories and the story-telling tradition. For instance, Flora's story might be considered as an adaptation of Alice or any other post-Alice adaptation. Just like the relationships in the narrative, it is, then, not only a daughter of a single "mother-text"; but rather it may have many other relations to many other texts. Moreover, there are intratextual

references in the stories, which underline the connectivity among the tales. In the first story, we learn that Susan narrates the story of the frog who cannot boil the kettle, which is reminiscent of Edith's story. Maggie encounters the playing children of first story and we find Flora and Edith's toys in Old Dame Margaret's shop. None of the stories in Rossetti's text can stand alone; but rather, they are related and linked to the previous stories and the stories told within *Speaking Likenesses*. Creativity without originality is celebrated over procreativity in the narrative.

In *Christina Rossetti Revisited*, Smulders highlights the use of irony connected to the metatextual aspect of the story. As Flora encounters her speaking likeness embodied in the spoiled birthday queen, Edith's extreme confidence at the beginning shatters when she cannot even strike a single match. The fact that nothing really happens in Edith's story makes it more ironic subverting the reader's expectations (Smulders, 1996: 119). With her red cap and basket, Maggie turns out to be an ironic adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood* in her home-coming story. Likewise, the nieces correct and edit the stories of the aunt by limiting her authority as the teller of tales. Ironically, they become the story-tellers as they gain power and recreate the narratives. The incapability of Flora and Edith makes a sharper contrast with the full-fledged accomplished heroes of the ancient epic. In a similar way, the heroines of Rossetti are ironic caricatures of the able protagonists of the Victorian female *Bildungsroman*.

*Speaking Likenesses* should not be read solely as a post-Alice book since it makes definite allusions to other Victorian classics (Briggs, 1999: 229). The female voyager in this case is not only the mock-epic heroine, who teases the classical epic tradition, but also the ironic rewriting of contemporary female wanderers. Rossetti approaches this newly emerging wandering figure in a mocking way. *Speaking Likenesses* reflects the Victorian enthusiasm for Greek culture, adventure and expeditions. As the interest in the female epic tradition and female wandering heroes emerges among Victorian women writers, Christina Rossetti ventures to write her "small and local narratives" —in Lyotard's terms (1984: xi). Her four little voyager heroines not only mock the wandering classical epic heroes but also present an alternative to the emerging genre of the Victorian female *Bildungsroman*. In that sense, *Speaking Likenesses* is not only critical of the canonical epic but also doubtful about its feminist Victorian adaptations. Defying classical literature and questioning the contemporary debates about it, *Speaking Likenesses* stands out as a text that utilizes rewriting to be able to demonstrate other possible forms of travel and wandering heroes. Through its re-definition of "adaptation" and "travel", it aims to reconcile the continuous wandering between nostalgia and progress and source text and its adaptation. Yet whereas Rossetti takes a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards male epics, she has more confidence, I suggest, in female novels of development. Despite Flora and Edith's ironic and superfluous maturation stories, the development and the creative skills of Maggie, the nieces and the reader

all make a statement about the authority embedded in re-telling stories and the power of travelling as a strong motif that bolsters story-telling.

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