

MAIDEN-SONGS:  
THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE CHILD  
IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *SPEAKING LIKENESSES*

Claire Senior

In 1986, U.C. Knoepfelmacher wrote of Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* that "this negative book ... has, not inappropriately, been denied a place in her canon" (311). Over one hundred years had passed since the work's original publication, but Knoepfelmacher's comment was highly representative of critical opinion, both past and present, of the story.<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, this view of *Speaking Likenesses* has begun to change, and scholars have discovered a wealth of material to add to the burgeoning field of Christina Rossetti studies. The three separate tales that make up the story describe a failed birthday party, a doomed attempt to light a fire, and a dangerous journey that ends with the promise of Heaven. As an added dimension, the three main characters are identified as fictional within the text itself, as all three stories are ostensibly narrated by a rather grim aunt to a small group of girls. Consequently, a good deal has been made of the text's didacticism, of its strange, Carrollian imagery (see Knoepfelmacher and Smulders), and of its relationship with Arthur Hughes's illustrations (see Kaston), but the small heroines of the story have often found themselves on the periphery of the discussion, mentioned only in passing as necessary but ultimately uninteresting components of a more intriguing whole. Hence, I wish to return to Rossetti's own critical insight about the nature of her characters – her decision to "adopt 'Speaking Likenesses'" as her title: "Very likely you did not so deeply ponder upon my text as to remark that my small heroines perpetually encounter 'speaking (literally speaking) likenesses' or embodiments or caricatures of themselves or their faults" (*Letters* 2:19). It was a title that Rossetti was proud of, and one that links the speaking likeness to the notion of an integral self divided into two or more parts, which many critics see as recurring in several of Rossetti's works. In the case of a little girl in a moral tale, however, the doppelgänger is unlikely to mimic the child's innocence, and must instead reflect her innate potential for