

MUSE FROM NOWHERE: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S  
 FANTASY WORLD IN SPEAKING LIKENESSES

Nowhere is the original title Christina Rossetti gave to the volume of three short stories she later called Speaking Likenesses (1874). The first name, abandoned because Dante Gabriel Rossetti told his sister "the title would seem a little stale" as well as "unlucky because of that freethinking book called Erewhon"<sup>1</sup> (1872), is suggestive of the kind of fantasy world created by Carroll that Christina Rossetti quite deliberately sought to imitate. The stories, she once explained, are "would-be in the Alice style with an eye to the market."<sup>2</sup> The second title, Speaking Likenesses, was chosen, as Rossetti herself remarked, for its particular didactic applicability to all three stories, in each of which girl protagonists confront images of themselves -- occasionally grotesque and distorted figures -- in order to better understand and then modify specific shortcomings of character: "my small heroines perpetually encounter 'speaking' (literally speaking) likenesses or embodiments or caricatures of themselves or their faults."<sup>3</sup> The two titles point to the mixture in Speaking Likenesses of the Victorian fantasy tradition -- Carroll's two Alice books being its best-known examples -- and the somewhat older tradition of the moral or didactic tale represented by Thomas Day's Sandford and Merton and the stories of Maria Edgeworth and Mrs. Sherwood. It is the nature of the relationship between these two literary strains in Speaking Likenesses that is the chief concern here.

The dialectic between the strains of fantasy and didacticism in the post-Alice era of children's writing has a striking parallel in a well-known feature of Christina Rossetti's own writings, variously described as a conflict between the flesh and the spirit, worldliness and self-denial, and pleasure and punishment.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it has led one of her biographers, Georgina Battiscombe, to subtitle her book on Christina Rossetti A Divided Life. As will be shown, several of the motifs that are related to this conflict -- journeys, dreams, temptation, guilt, and salvation -- are as much a part of Speaking Likenesses as of the rest of Rossetti's work -- not merely the familiar "Goblin Market" -- demonstrating that Christina Rossetti's creative imagination finds comparable forms of expression in works for child and adult.

According to Amy Cruse, Sandford and Merton, Mrs. Sherwood's The Fairchild Family, and Maria Edgeworth's Moral Tales were among the favorites of children prior to 1837.<sup>5</sup> Christina Rossetti, born in 1830, was apparently offered these standard "favorites" by her mother, Frances