Little lambs, linnets and babes in the snow: messages of kindness and caution in Christina Rossetti's _Sing-Song_ and _Speaking Likenesses_

Sara Marie Richardson Perez
_Iowa State University_

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Little lambs, linnets and babes in the snow:
messages of kindness and caution in Christina Rossetti’s *Sing Song* and *Speaking Likenesses*

by

*Sara Marie Richardson Perez*

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
Kathleen Hickok, Major Professor
   Donna Niday
   David Zimmerman

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Who are so apt as Mothers . . . to protect the interest of themselves and their offspring? I do think if anything ever does sweep away the barrier of sex, and make the female not a giantess or a heroine but at once a full grown hero and a giant, it is that mighty maternal love which makes little birds and little beasts as well as little women matches for very big adversaries.

(Rossetti, quoted in Bell, 110)
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In this study of Christina Rossetti’s two books for children, *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872) and *Speaking Likenesses* (1875), I use, in part, a feminist theoretical lens to examine the implicit directions given to young girls about how to be an appropriate girl, woman, mother, and citizen of the British Empire in the 19th century. In many ways, the poems and stories in these two books contain a subtle set of rules regarding behavior for the implied audience, which is largely middle-class, white, and Christian. What does this book say to the little girl sitting by her mother’s knee about who she should become, the lines she should walk, the dangers that threaten her and the rules she should obey to avoid trouble?

The work of Christina Rossetti reflects an interesting middle place between a feminist viewpoint and an insistence on abiding by a patriarchal set of rules. She seems to find a place that is neither adversarial to the existing patriarchal structures nor entirely satisfied by living within it. Both books celebrate the safety and love found in the mother-child relationship and expand that to portray the extended community of female care-givers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, as nearly utopian. *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses* contain pieces which portray a respite from the temptations and dangers of the larger world in the female sphere of the nursery.

Of particular interest in these two texts is the inclusion of a cautionary note on the fallen woman and the dangers of sensuality and promiscuity. Although the dangers of sexual promiscuity seem to a modern reader an odd lesson for a children’s work, poetry and literature for children has a long history of providing moral lessons as a primary purpose for reading to and with children. Christina Rossetti’s works for children, *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses*, reflect Victorian society’s struggle, as well as her own, to reconcile religious,
political and personal beliefs with the changing place of women in society. These works mark a particular moment in Rossetti’s life and, in my reading, the books provide a kind of instruction manual for girls still in the nursery and their mothers, who are most powerful by virtue of their position within those four walls, if not yet without.
CHAPTER 2. THE TIMES

In order to understand the world into which Rossetti’s books were written and received, we must examine how the genre of children’s literature was changing, in part due to changes to the Victorian family, an increased value placed on the experience of childhood, and a growing uncertainty about British life.

_Sing-Song_’s publication in 1872 and _Speaking Likenesses_ in 1875 arrive both in Rossetti’s career as a poet and in Victorian culture, in a middle place. _Sing-Song_ was published in the popular rise of Carroll’s _Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland_ (1865) and _Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There_ (1871) and in the shadow of the didactic, often religious or evangelical, poetry of the early Victorians that was intended to create an obedient child. Part of what makes Rossetti’s work for children so compelling for further study is that it is caught in the midst of all this change. And while some of _Sing-Song_’s pieces could be grouped with Edward Lear’s, the other poems lack any word-play or clever nonsense and “repeat the moral and sentimental themes which were the stock in trade of nineteenth-century children’s poetry” (Garlitz 555). These latter poems are rooted in the moral tradition of children’s poetry which goes back to _Watts's Divine Songs for Children_ (1715) and the _Taylors' Original Poems for Infant Minds_ (1804). The inclusion of both nonsense poems and those that appear sternly moral makes _Sing-Song_ difficult to define. Children’s books have had a long history of didactic messages – moral lessons of obedience, religious piety, goodness and kindness, particularly for young girls. Historically, work for children has struggled between entertaining and providing moral guidance. Humphrey Carpenter writes,

All children’s books are about ideals. Adult fiction sets out to portray and explain the world as it really is; books for children present it as it should be. Child readers come to them hoping for a certain amount of instruction . . . Adults on the other hand, are more likely to want to feed the children a set of moral examples. (1)
Until the middle of the nineteenth century there was material for the sheer entertainment of children, and other material that gave them moral instruction, “but the two scarcely met between one set of covers” (Carpenter 2). Children had long been exposed to literature, but it was only relatively recently that a market was built around them specifically, or that, more accurately, one could hope to make money from selling books intended for children. Previous generations heard the same stories read aloud as the adults did or were included in stories told around a fire or a table. The objection to “adult” themes and violence often found in these stories, fairy tales as a prime example, was fading by the mid-1800s, although earlier critics, like Sarah Timmer, would have liked to see all fairy stories go out of nurseries and up in flames. This objection stems, in part, from the alleged “injury on the tender minds of the children” as well as the failure of “tales of this kind (to) supply any moral instruction level to the infantine capacity” (Carpenter 3).

Instruction was generally seen as more valuable than amusement by both parents and booksellers. Children’s books from the mid 1700s until the mid 1800s were “ sternly moral” (Carpenter 3). The books contained messages relevant to the values of the day, both religious and secular. Hard work leading to improvement in one’s social and financial prospects, the importance of obedience to authority in the form of parent or God, or that “idle and thoughtless children would soon die an unpleasant death and then suffer everlasting torment in Hell” were morals found in books meant to properly mold a child’s mind. (Carpenter 2) The chapbooks intended only for entertainment of children were, of course, more popular among their child readership. However, as is true in children’s book publishing both then and now, the dual audience of books for children requires a commitment on the part of the parent to want to purchase the text. Parents have the money and thus have the ability to control much of the reading material a child might be exposed
to, particularly at a young age. Anything not attempting to impart a moral message was seen as “an opportunity that was being wasted” (Carpenter 2).

A unique feature of children’s books, and of both Speaking Likenesses and Sing-Song, is the inclusion of illustrations as frequent interruptions, additions and pairings to the text. Part of what makes a layered and nuanced reading of these texts possible is the visual pairing of Rossetti’s verse and the illustrations of Arthur Hughes. Hughes was known as “a gifted illustrator of children’s literature” (Kooistra 99). The collaboration of Rossetti and Hughes was a fortunate one for the success of the books as Hughes was able to build upon and improve Rossetti’s existing concept of the illustrations. Hughes used many of Rossetti’s original illustrations for inspiration when he created the accompanying artwork. With the publication of Sing-Song, Hughes solidified his reputation. Kooistra writes, “his style, a charming blend of fantasy and domestic actuality, was precisely suited to the rhymes in Sing-Song” (99). The rich interaction between the rhymes and the illustrations not only made the read-aloud experience more pleasurable for the pre-literate child audience but in creating sophisticated illustrations Hughes also provided an additional opportunity for the expansion of the symbols and meanings of the verse for the reading adult. Smulders sees in the illustrations that, “The genius of Hughes's illustrations lies not only in their individual charm but also in the way they pick up on the refined clues in Rossetti's verse and contribute to the whole sense of Sing-Song” (12). Further, the interactions of illustration and text “advance a socially critical message,” because Rossetti can at once write deceptively simple verse for children on the surface and also act as a kind of “social reformer” for adults reading between (and above) the lines (Kooistra 101).
The perfectibility of the Victorian family

The shift in children’s literature had to do, in part, with the larger shift in thinking of a child as something other than a “miniature adult, a chrysalis from which a fully rational and moral being would duly emerge... The only necessity was for instruction to be poured in their ears, and the only argument about what sort of instruction it should be” (Carpenter 7).

The Romantics’ view of childhood had previously suggested that children and childhood might offer a kind of “visionary simplicity” that the adult perspective lacked (Carpenter 7). Meaning that children, instead of minds waiting to be filled, may actually have a clarified perspective, one that sees more innocently and with greater spiritual perception, the real meanings of things. Rossetti’s rhymes in Sing-Song have been linked to the Romantic period and, specifically, to Blake’s Songs of Innocence, one of the most famous examples of this kind of elevation of a child’s perspective. Charles writes in her biography of Rossetti, “Rossetti in the Blake tradition, shows her love and veneration for innocence – children, lambs, birds dogs, cats, rabbits, caterpillars, flowers and sea beasts” (103). Christina Rossetti’s brother D. G. Rossetti described the volume as “alternating between the merest babyism and a sort of Blakish wisdom and tenderness... no one could have written something so absolutely right for babies” (Charles 103).

Although this Romantic view of childhood and children persisted, the focus on obedience remained as well. Sickbert writes about the authors of mothers’ advice manuals like Sarah Ellis, Lydia Child, and John Abbott who recommended that “mothers exact absolute and unquestioning obedience from their children” (391). Abbott advises his readers that, "The first thing therefore to be aimed at, is to bring your child under perfect subjection. Teach him that he must obey you. Sometimes give him your reasons; again, withhold them" (Sickbert 391). Abbot’s example of a fine parenting model is Napoleon. He praises the leader
for firing into a rioting mob, thus showing his strength and fearlessness as a leader. Abbott's link between the domestic and the political is consequential and not uncommon. Sarah Ellis has a similar metaphorical understanding of the family as a microcosm, the place where children learn submission to parental authority in preparation to submit to government and religious authority. She writes, "I am fully persuaded that the habit of rebellion against human authority, allowed in early life, will render the habit of submission to a higher power of more difficult attainment in after years" (Sickbert 391). Ellis's message, which creates a link between present obedience to a mother with future good citizenship and religious devotion, was combined with “new attitudes toward children's mental health and moral development, based on the view that the child had particular needs which only its mother could fill” (Hanft 215). The increased pressure on mothers, that projected her child's infantile/childhood obedience into his or her future adult happiness and success, was even further complicated by the methods they were to use to achieve perfect obedience in their children. According to Hanft, “Mothers were required to be always affectionate toward, intimate with, accessible to, and indulgent toward their children, and to renounce verbal and corporal punishment” (217). The indulgence and lack of punishment expected of Victorian mothers and women complicated the goal of obtaining the child’s obedience. Victorian motherhood provided more power in some ways for women but also increased surveillance of women in their roles as mothers, successfully enforcing norms of maternal behavior and attitudes which were largely derived from patriarchal constructions. It is not surprising then that Rossetti's work for children often reads as both an encouragement of subtle rebellion as well as a warning to stay in line; the expectations of childhood, and particularly girlhood, were similarly contradictory.
All of the focus on obedience, for both child and mother, had much to do with the notion that the family should be controlled. Vallone writes, “The Victorian era was heavily invested in the idea of the perfectibility of the family through the scrutiny of women and children. The family became visible in a variety of ways during Queen Victoria's long reign and the rise of the ‘Golden Age’ of children's literature” (217). Queen Victoria’s example and the intense surveillance and monitoring of mothers and children created increased pressure to have the perfect family but also created greater interest in investing time and attention on children, thus providing an opportunity for the rise of children’s literature for a select class of people. The middle-and-upper-class child “whose papa and mama had five shillings to spare on a picture book” would be the likely audience of books like *Sing-Song.* (Kooistra 92). The audience Rossetti writes to is in this way narrowed and allows the messages of the poems and stories to be directed more specifically.

The changing Victorian family

If children in general, seen in more Romantic terms, were more valuable and worthy of attention, so then was each individual child. The Victorian period marked a decrease in family size, which created more time and attention to be lavished on the existing children. Family limitation began at about the same time for the upper and lower classes in the 1870s, but, Vallone argues, for very different reasons: “middle-class women's children began to live longer and families may have wanted fewer children in order to improve the standard of life and educational prospects of those children” (218).

This understanding of the consumer audience is particularly important when in Rossetti’s poems that focus on charity to or sympathy for the poor, the audience is not the poor themselves. Although lower birth rates and books for children may seem to be only
distantly related, according to Carpenter “one literary result of the falling birth rate was a sentimental idealization of childhood” which resulted in more attention paid to the lessons of childhood as well as more money spent on children and childhood (18).

By the time Rossetti authored Sing-Song in 1872 and Speaking Likenesses in 1875, there was a growing skepticism in Britain about the success of the Industrial Revolution and realizations about the resulting misery of the working poor upon whose backs that Revolution was built. Although the British Empire continued to expand, the sense that it was infallible was met with anxiety about the future. This anxiety perhaps inspired authors of primarily adult literature, Rossetti included, to turn for material and inspiration toward the simpler time of childhood as a kind of escape from the more complicated and less pleasant present. The middle-class Victorians lavished more attention on children and valued childhood more “because of the uncertainty of the adult public world” (Carpenter 19). People turned towards the family and hoped to receive from their children “the sense of security and stability which the outside world was not providing” (Carpenter 19).

The intended audience of books like Rossetti’s Sing-Song and Speaking Likenesses was not only defined by class but also increasingly by age and gender. As books were possible to purchase for an audience with an “extra five shillings”, those books become more specific in content. Books were published for young children who could not yet read and other books were written for older more sophisticated children. There were also books that were published to appeal specifically for boys and others for girls. This more specific marketing in publishing, according to Kooistra, “effectively produced the image of the child at the same time as it produced a book for her” (92). The image of girlhood was marketable for nearly the first time in Victorian England. While there were certainly previous examples of girlhood/womanhood that had appeared in literature, the rise of children’s literature marked
the beginning of marketing that was meant specifically for girls. In much the same way that modern girl culture has American Girl, Ramona Quimby and Dora the Explorer, Victorian girls would have the examples and lessons in *Sing-Song, Speaking Likenesses* and other texts. Advertisements for other books for girls even appeared in the back pages of *Speaking Likenesses*. In addition, *Sing-Song* was a nursery rhyme book produced for a pre-literate child; it would need to be read aloud. The narrator of the stories in *Speaking Likenesses* is reading them aloud while the girls work on darning and sewing. The format of the small poems and stories meant to be read aloud worked to further narrow the audience to which Rossetti would write, to a particular age and subject matter. Each of these aspects of the text informs the messages the book conveys about moral behavior but also about economic and sexual relationships.
CHAPTER 3. CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S CAREER

The rise of the woman/mother as a moral center of the family opened up space within the writing community to publish women’s writing for children as this idea was in line with the notion of women being particularly suited for educating children. From a less satisfying feminist perspective, one could argue that women had found a genre which was not as scholarly or potentially fraught with complication and involvement as the sullied world outside the domestic sphere. Vallone writes about the new genre:

Of all literary forms, children’s literature would seem to be most in keeping with the ideology of domesticity and with femininity as defined as a ‘woman’s mission.’ Writing children’s literature was an extension of woman’s role as the moral educator of the nation’s young; because they endorsed and exemplified generally accepted notions about children, class, and gender, female writers of children’s literature found that they and their work met with public acceptance and approbation.

(216)

As Vallone suggests, writing work for children seemed an appropriate venture for a female author and still allowed her to occupy herself with a domestic duty of sorts. Sing-Song was Rossetti’s first book for children, quickly followed by Speaking Likenesses. However, both before and after their publication, she wrote work that was not intended for children. So while it is important to acknowledge the ways in which these books were a product of a moment and movement within Victorian culture, Rossetti was not limited to only this relatively tame subject matter and social space.

Although not a primary subject of analysis in this paper, it is interesting to note that Rossetti’s Goblin Market, composed in April 1859 and published in 1862, ten years before Sing-Song, explores many of the same themes in a much more sophisticated and overtly sensual way for an adult audience (although the poem was often seen as a work for children, this was not Rossetti’s intention). The parallels between the texts make it evident that
Rossetti is the author of both works; the preoccupations and explorations remain the same. *Sing-Song*, however, is careful not to push us too far out of the nursery. The dangerous, sensual and sexual life outside the nursery door is only hinted at, whispered under the poems, but still present in ruined nests and lambs abandoned. Comparatively, in *Speaking Likenesses* and *Goblin Market* the danger is played out in lurid detail.

*Speaking Likenesses* also contains the same type of meta-format as “Goblin Market.” It begins with the mother/aunt telling a story to a specific audience, one in which we, as readers, are also included. Setting up the story as directed at an audience of “actual” specific children adds to the sense that we are meant to be learning from both pieces. I would argue that both *Goblin Market* and *Speaking Likenesses* contain the message that leaving the sphere of the home and refusing to abide by the rules set out leads to terrible danger, physical harm included – danger that one so small and with so little power cannot hope to control alone. The fantastic elements in both pieces, goblins, spectral children, and furniture that talks and sympathizes, make the message no less clear, and perhaps even more frightening. No one can predict what may happen to a girl/woman in the woods or in the wide world of the public and political sphere.

The resurgence of the kind of fantasy and nonsense found in Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses* and, more famously, in the writing of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, seems to represent both something new and something entirely familiar. *Speaking Likenesses* is intentionally responding to Carroll’s *Alice* books, which were published previous to both *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses*. *Speaking Likenesses* suffered under the comparison and was not received nearly as favorably as *Sing-Song*.

Rossetti’s *Sing-Song* does show the influence the rise of fantasy and nonsense literature, but it is not altogether a playful book and contains much less of the fantastic than
Speaking Likenesses. Although it may now be impossible to determine exactly what a Victorian audience found engaging about the text, Sing-Song was well received by various audiences and “earned popular and critical success upon its publication. It was reviewed favorably along with Edward Lear's nonsense poems and Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, went into four English-language editions, and was translated into Italian” (Sickbert 390). However, both Sing-Song and Speaking Likenesses have failed to sustain the long-lasting fascination of audiences that both Lear and Carroll enjoy, though both of Rossetti’s books for children do remain currently in print.

Rossetti’s overall poetic accomplishment was more expansive than her work for children and Goblin Market, for which she is most well known. The vast majority of Rossetti’s work for adults contained a moral message with highly religious imagery and subject matter. Her personal religious faith was central in her life and appeared often in her work. In considering Rossetti’s body of religious works, and her reputation for strict obedience to religious ideals, Sickbert writes that, “Her almost total lack of overt reference to religion in her children's poetry seems quite remarkable. She never mentions or even refers obliquely to God, Jesus, or Christianity, and she suggests heaven only by alluding occasionally to ‘angels’ or to a generic rather than Christianized ‘paradise’ (397). The following poem about an infant’s death and the mother grief, of which there are many in Sing-Song, provides an example of the treatment of religion found throughout:

A baby’s cradle with no baby in it.
A baby’s grave where autumn leaves drop
The sweet soul gathered home to Paradise
The body waiting here.

(15)

Although there are few overt religious messages in the poems of Sing-Song, to see this book as a great departure from her other works would also be incorrect. The moral tone of Sing-
Song remains very much in Rossetti’s range. Sing-Song contains fewer of the clear moral lessons found in earlier publications for children; however, the moral directives that do appear are impossible to ignore. Rossetti’s stance on any issue, women voting, sexual morality, child death, is inevitably filtered through her religious beliefs. So, although there are few if any mentions of God in either of her books for children, He is there all the same.

Rossetti’s politics

From the 1850s through the 1880s, the period in which Rossetti composed most of her poetry and her didactic religious work, including devotional prose and Biblical explorations, “social and legal legislation increasingly focused on the social behavior constituting femininity and maternity” (Hanft 220). In Mackenzie Bell’s biography of Christina, Dante Rossetti was famously quoted as having said, “Christina has no politics” (101). Although it may not have been the arena in which she was most well known, it appears that Christina Rossetti did participate in politics; She was known to support legislation which promoted the roles of men and women as Biblically dictated and also had correspondence with friends about the rights of mothers and of women. The desire to keep separate the spheres of men and women is often cited as the reason Rossetti did not support women’s suffrage. This decision complicates feminist readings of her work, yet, rather, suggests Anna Despotopoulou, than “proving her patriarchal Puritanism, this gesture . . . suggests a progressive social insight into the drawbacks of women venturing uncritically and unreservedly into the public sphere” (418).

Christina Rossetti’s true motivation is uncertain; what is certain is that the role of women in society and the right for them to control their bodies and lives was a subject of much attention in the years before and after her writing for children. In the years
surrounding the books’ publications Hanft writes about the following pieces of legislation that were considered and debated:

- The Contagious Diseases Acts (passed in 1864-69 and repealed in 1883)
- The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857)
- The Married Women's Property Act (1870, 1882)
- The proposed bill for female suffrage (defeated in 1884).

Her list also included infant protection bills that were intended to prevent infanticide or to protect children as workers (219). As they were introduced, these bills played out in the legal system the debate already existing in the home and in popular culture. (Hanft 219). These legal ways of monitoring and controlling female behavior had both positive and negative ramifications for the lives of women. Rossetti’s conservative Biblically based beliefs complicated her place in the struggle to conceptualize a woman’s place in Victorian society.

Although on the surface the poems in Sing-Song may not appear to challenge Victorian culture, I find that there exists a subversive contesting under the surface of these simple poems. If the work is meant to, as Hanft writes, “demonstrate and participate in the cultural and textual formation of female selfhood, or femininity” (214). How much does Rossetti want the child reader to challenge the conventional standards? Read within the context of political and legal discourse about feminine identity and maternal behavior, Rossetti’s poetry, particularly the apparently conventional children's verse of Sing-Song, “questions and contests domestic idealizations of feminine identity” in some ways while urging girls and women to be obedient at the same time (Hanft 214).
CHAPTER 4. WOMEN’S ROLES

The general despair and confusion that occurred in Britain near the end of the century -- as well as Queen Victoria’s impending death -- forced British society to question that which was previously considered certain. Rossetti’s work explores her struggle to understand how patriarchal constructions of femininity are further complicated by personal ambivalence about the women’s position in both the public and private spheres. Though she said her own desire "to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtian" made it impossible for her to "aim at ‘women's rights','" women’s rights were increasingly a subject of public debate, which makes Rossetti’s treatment of these issues compelling to examine as a product of a historical and personal struggle (Bell 111-12). I see in Rossetti’s work a kinship with the kind of feminism Charlotte Perkins Gilman proposes in her writing, which instead of arguing for more equality in the existing (male) public sphere finds value in creating female communities. Before Rossetti wrote Sing-Song and Speaking Likenesses feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and Josephine Butler were already advocating for changes in politics and laws in England as they pertained to women’s rights. Butler’s Letter to My Countrywomen, Dwelling in the Farmsteads and Cottages of England, (1871) which provides a sympathetic portrait of the fallen woman and protests the passage of the Contagious Diseases Act was published just one year before Sing-Song. This is significant only to show that Rossetti lived in a time and place with an active feminist movement, one that she did not join. Although her work shows an understanding of the problematic nature of the existing patriarchal system perhaps her religious beliefs made it difficult for her to find a place within a movement advocating for so much change that was in direct disagreement with her Biblical beliefs. What Christina really believed about women’s rights is difficult to determine. What we can see in her work for girls is the challenge to impact change by joining
with other women/girls, while at the same time portraying, with vivid example, the necessity not to stray too far.

For example, the following poem and accompanying illustration seem to indicate a shift in power, at least within the domestic sphere.

Wee wee husband
Give me some money
I have no comfits
And I have no honey.

Wee wee wife
I have no money
Milk, nor meat, nor bread to eat,
Comfits, nor honey.

Even the descriptor “wee wee husband” seems to indicate a deflation of the typical patriarchal model. The husband is failing in his primary role of providing financial safety for the family. The wife brandishes a collect of sticks and a raised fist in response to the husband’s empty pockets. Although the portrayal is comic, one could read in this a legitimate image of female power. However, far more frequently in Sing-Song poems like the following appear which seem to confirm the natural hierarchical importance of the familial roles.

What does the bee do?
Bring home honey.
And what does Father do?
Bring home money.
And what does Mother do?
Lay out the money.
And what does baby do?
Eat up the honey.

This poem and the harmony of the illustration accompanying the line suggest a kind of
natural rightness to the family roles and functions when performed correctly. Just as a bee is
meant to produce honey, so is the Father's job to be in the public sphere and the Mother's in
the home. The Mother's role of "laying out" or spending the money appears less significant
than Father's purpose. Both the mother's and the baby's roles are as consumers of the bee
and the father's work. This poem is joined by multiple marriage poems, poems that feature a
wife waiting for husband at sea and even a wedding poem, excerpted below:

A ring upon her finger
Walks the bride,
With the bridegroom tall and handsome
At her side.

(90)

These conventional pieces do little to provide an alternative aspiration for her young readers
besides inevitable marriage. This is particularly interesting considering Rossetti's own
reluctance to marry, despite multiple proposals. The pieces that seem to offer the greatest
challenges to these typical ideals are often found in metaphor, particularly in her poems
focusing on vulnerable animal life, a discussion that takes place in Chapter 5.

Exploring the mother's role

The Victorian elevation of motherhood ceded more and more power to
women, and unlike the women's suffrage movement, which bitterly divided
radicals from conservatives like Rossetti who believed (at least at a conscious
level) that women's secondary status was divinely ordained, the social
sanction of motherhood compelled women to seize power with cultural and
religious approval.

(Sickbert 398)

If we were to create a Victorian scene of perfected domestic bliss, it would perhaps
be a mother reading aloud in the nursery to her pink-cheeked children. They listen
attentively, obediently, repeating perhaps a familiar favorite line. The mother is patient, kind
and wise. And in this listening and repeating there is something almost sacred taking place
under the surface, which is not simply Victorian, but is happening in bedrooms around the world this very evening. Something is being taught; something is being learned. There is much to deconstruct and engage in this image of family perfection. The middle-class mother spending time with her children, the children’s obedience and goodness, the relationship between mother/teacher and child are not only realities of this scene but also ideals of a particular moment in Victorian culture and in the construction of the family.

In creating parameters and definitions of a good woman, femininity and maternity were often conflated into one; motherhood was seen as the center of a woman's life, a woman's profession, or, to quote the title of Sarah Lewis's popular conduct book, a "woman's mission" (Vallone 217). Motherhood, which is imagined to be the most private of spaces, is instead intensely public; a space that is idealized as entirely separate from political sway or societal pressure is faced with both at every turn. Raising children, and motherhood in particular, has long been a political space or platform for contemporary issues to be played out upon. Mothers in the 21st century grapple with what lessons we are to introduce to our children, what to feed them, what to read to them, the appropriate sexual orientation of their care-givers, what we believe about God, the words we must not say, the hours they must not watch television, breastfeeding, vaccination, weaning, exposure to plastic, how to teach a child to be kind, but not so kind as to be the victim of bullying, how to be moral but also how to get ahead. This struggle has, while not in specifics, likely been occurring in spirit since there were children to be raised. There is undeniably power in having the ability to make these choices for one's children in the home: a place where women, if nowhere else, are in charge. However, this power is granted only with supervision, rules to be followed and consequences for disobedience for both a child and a mother who refuse to obey.
Whenever the politics of family life, of babies and women as mothers or potential mothers, is debated there is always a correct way to be a good mother. If we understand about womanhood (and thus girlhood) that, “for most middle-class Victorians, a woman's primary purpose was to exert ‘moral influence’ over men and children, a purpose from which no other interests should detract” (Hanft 214), what this means exactly is full of contradictions and missteps. Even within a theoretically private space, the political and societal are inescapable. Motherhood and the act of raising children are deeply personal and also intimately connected to a larger system of belief about, among other things, women’s bodies, roles and responsibilities, societal responsibility for the poor and disenfranchised, connections to the natural world and the lessons a mother must teach her children about how to treat the world and those who inhabit it.

There exist, both for the Victorian mother and the 21st century one, “mothering manuals” which provide pragmatic solutions to the conundrum of raising children well. These books are full of literal advice, while other books, like Sing-Song and Speaking Likenesses, more interestingly provide instruction just under the surface. Literature has long been a marker of society’s concerns, a place where the reader and author can grapple with issues that can appear large and impersonal by making them small, naming them and giving them a problem to be solved within the pages of text. Children’s literature is in a unique position of serving a dual audience, children, the alleged primary audience, and the secondary audience, the parent, often the mother, who is the conduit through which the book will arrive.

Rossetti’s books for children are written to mothers and children by speaking for as well as to nineteenth-century femininity. As Edna Charles writes, “Rossetti accommodates the childlike simplicity of the nursery rhyme to the adult voice of duty and desire, power and passion, doubt and dependence” (104). The compression of complicated, adult themes into small
lines for children is what makes Rossetti’s work so compelling for study from a feminist perspective.

Although women of the 1870s lacked political and monetary power, there is often overlooked power in being the moral head of the family. Motherhood, as the sacred role of the female, was not to be delegated to household help, as may have been the fashion in earlier years. Rossetti, though not a mother herself, speaks often in the maternal voice in *Sing-Song*. “Maternal identity, with its ‘moral qualities,’ had become the apex of ideal femininity. Unmarried women like Rossetti were directed to devote their maternal energies to surrogate children” (Hanft 215). Rossetti was known to be a devoted aunt as was considered appropriate for a childless woman. In addition though, it is interesting to think about *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses* as Rossetti’s way of performing the duty of female/maternal identity on a grand scale. In using the maternal voice, the primary voice in charge of educating girls, she is able to assert a power that remained at odds with many of the realities of a patriachal society.

Although Rossetti was not a mother, she had been mothered. Her own relationship with her mother was very close. Christina Rossetti and her mother, Frances, were said to have a “deep and life-long attachment not shared with the other children,” as evidenced by the fact that Rossetti “dedicated all but one of her books to her mother, wrote her mother love poetry (valentines and sonnets) and lived with her until Frances’ death” (Bell 112). The voice in *Speaking Likenesses* and *Sing-Song* was not necessarily considered a very significant one in Victorian England, but was certainly one that Rossetti saw as essential.
Claiming song

Rossetti’s knowledge that adult readers, primarily mothers, would also be reading her poems further supports the idea that the poems should contain some messages, however covert, that spoke to social issues surrounding womanhood. In examining Rossetti’s own struggle with the proper place of women in society, mirrored by the public struggle in Victorian England with the roles of mothers/girls/women, I find in Rossetti’s work a portrayal of innocence soured or ruined by the outside world. If girls and women are the innocents portrayed in the pieces, the dangers, the ways in which things could be ruined, are threats from without. The work that I focus on for further analysis sees this threat as masculine, but to simplify this to mean only boys/men would be inaccurate. The woman/girl acting outside her own gender could endanger herself as completely. There exists in these poems a warning as well as a kind of insistence or rallying cry to women and girls to come to the aid of those most vulnerable. If you fall, in Rossetti’s *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses*, as well as other more famous of Rossetti’s works, another woman might be the only way for you to be redeemed.

This dual audience allows for creation and occupation of the separate space of the nursery, and puts mother and child on equal ground, in isolation from the rest of the more dangerous world. Sickbert writes, “This focus on a relationship which sees both mother and child as subjects and excludes the father characterizes Rossetti’s work. *Sing-Song* presents the mother as an active subject who does not regard the child as an object” (387). The nursery becomes for women and children a place that is both rule-bound and restricted by outside forces and also a place where they can be free to speak. Women and children can use one societal restriction, isolation in the nursery, to defy another by claiming song and asserting themselves as speaking subjects. The poems create a circle in which both child’s and
mother's needs are acknowledged and answered by one another. This leveling, mother and child as equal participants, has been seen by some critics as being most respectful of the child. Of Robert Louis Stevenson’s book, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), to which *Sing-Song* has often been compared, Sickbert writes that,

not even Robert Louis Stevenson, using the child's voice, presents as dignified and respectful an image of the child. Some readers find that the dissonance between the voice of the adult poet who knows and the child who doesn't is underscored by Stevenson's frequent deflation of the child's world at the end of the poem.

(389)

Rossetti’s approach of portraying a reciprocal relationship between mother and child, one where both members benefit and have something to gain, gives both mother and child the same ability to speak and act. It could equally be seen, in a less positive light, as a reality of womanhood in this historical moment which stunted a woman’s place and boundaries to such an extent that she is never, no matter how old she grows, allowed to leave the nursery. In equalizing the role of the mother and child into the same sphere, there is little difference in the vulnerability of either. As a child you may be left alone in the world by the death of a caretaker. As a woman (or mother as the terms collapse into each other in the text) you are only protected from the evils of the world if you are careful with what you say and do.

A warning against falling

In Rossetti’s world, there is little worse a woman could do than to be suspected of sexual impropriety. This is particularly true as societal perceptions of womanhood hung heavily on the idea of the perfect, if oxymoronic, virginal mother. The following poem seems to offer a sympathetic portrait of a young mother, likely a fallen woman, refusing to vilify her, while at the same time acknowledging the dangers of the world for women and children when left alone.
Crying, my little one, footsore and weary?
Fall asleep, pretty one, warm on my shoulder:
I must tramp on through the winter night dreary,
While the snow falls on me colder and colder.

You are my one, and I have not another;
Sleep soft, my darling, my trouble and treasure;
Sleep warm and soft in the arms of your mother,
Dreaming of pretty things, dreaming of pleasure.

This poem offers a dual lesson; the surface of the poem is an obligation to kindness and thus a grateful attention to the reader’s more comfortable situation, while underneath is an implied warning. What appears clear in the poem is that the problem of the poor woman is not primarily her poverty, although that is likely also the case as she is unable to hold her own money, but her isolation from those who are meant to “take care” of her. The poem shows a woman who is carrying an infant through the snow. Where is her husband? Where is the father of the child? Where is her family? And although it is possible to read the poem as being about poor women, it is also possible that she may be “one of the many Victorian ‘fallen women’ who were turned out of their homes with their illegitimate children” (Kooistra 108). The line “sleep soft, my darling, my trouble and treasure” appear particularly to point to the fallen-ness. The poem contains in this way a caution against making the kind of choices that would leave you vulnerable, alone in the snow, with a baby as the likely proof of your misdeed.

Christina Rossetti’s work at the Magdalene House for Fallen Women and her position as a Sister of Mercy at Highgate Penitentiary, a refuge for the recovery of fallen women, would have made it likely that she would have been sensitive to the women and girls who were most vulnerable to ill treatment. It would seem impossible for Rossetti to remove
the presence, or lens, of the lived experiences of the political and social struggle of women with whom she worked, even if the end result in *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses* was not what an audience of children and mothers would immediately identify as political. Rossetti remains in middle space, where she can challenge some of constraints of motherhood/womanhood without pushing the boundary too far, for herself or for her audience. Critics of her work have been interested in the effect on Rossetti’s political and literary impulses of her more than ten-year commitment volunteering to work with the women and girls. Despotopoulou speculates, based on Christina’s own description of herself as a woman of “‘a very passionate temper,’ [that] perhaps Christina felt, during her Highgate years, that it was merely her social position that saved her from the street. In her inner heart, Christina felt a strong affinity with the sister who succumbs” (21).

Controlling, or denying, young (or any) women’s sexual selves was a preoccupation for the Victorians. The child, as a tangible result of sexuality unbound, was problematic for the binary of mother and keeper of morality in the home, and the whore. This poem, among others, argues despite Rossetti’s “Christian piety, moral austerity and often self-castigating attitude, that she is particularly sensitive and resistant to the mutually exclusive labels of angel or prostitute conferred on women in the mid-Victorian period” (Despotopoulou 22). The portrayal of the woman and baby in the snow lacks the judgment of her misdeed, so common in other discourse. Having known the women of Highgate well, perhaps Christina Rossetti found it more difficult to see them, the fallen, as very different than herself.

The power of maternal love, obvious in the mother’s care for her child, can be seen as conquering circumstance or, alternatively, as not enough to make a difference in her own life or the life of her child. “Sleep warm and soft in the arms of your mother, /Dreaming of pretty things, dreaming of pleasure.” Although a nice image, the warmth of the mother’s
arms hardly seems sufficient to guard against the cold and falling snow, much less the larger societal isolation the cold represents. Entry into a dream could be interpreted as the baby’s death, a move into another more comfortable existence.

Infanticide was seen as a symptom of the lack of morality on the part of the fallen mother and was problematic for Victorian society. Hanft argues that, “since illegitimate children were thought to be the most likely victims of infanticide, the issues of poverty and prostitution or fallen-ness, perceived as moral contaminants, were imbedded in discussions of infanticide” (219). Alternatively in Rossetti’s portrayal, the poems that deal with the death of infants in *Sing-Song* all portray a grieving mother and a baby safe with winged angels. The obvious love that the mother has for her baby counters what may have been a societal perception of the fallen woman’s relationship to her child, and perhaps the child’s relationship with God. Also compelling, when imagining this poem as a portrait of a fallen woman, is the contrast with the dismal, dark and cold present of the scene and the memory or dream of pretty things and pleasure. A young girl’s foolish obsession with “pleasure and with pretty things” could be the very thing which tempted her, which led to her sexual indulgence or misdeed, to be eventually left alone in the metaphorical snow.

Another shorter poem in *Sing-Song* provides the same lesson but moves from the snow to the garden, offering another caution to suppress the sexual self. While the first poem presents the consequence of sexual activity, this one is meant to encourage girls to be a “lily that blooms spotless white”. It is through the illustration by Arthur Hughes that we see what the text alone only hints at. *Sing-Song* contains many poems about flowers and metaphors about nature generally. This poem relies both on the illustration as well as the readers’ knowledge of the association of the color red with passion and sexuality. In Mary
Chauncey’s book on the language of flowers or floriography, the red rose is seen as representative of love as well as shame.

The rose that blushes rosy red,
She must hang her head;
The lily that blows spotless white,
She may stand upright.

(112).

Interestingly, the girl in the illustration, although demure, is neither hanging her head nor appearing spotlessly upright while in conversation with the young man over the gate. She hides behind the blooms while the young man appears menacingly casual. Perhaps, we are to understand that even conversation in the garden can lead to impropriety. The typical Victorian girl, despite class distinctions, is constructed as “unable to suppress her impulses and as possessing uncontrollable libidinal energy in dire need of constant male regulation” (Despotopoulou 433). Discourse on female sexuality in the mid to late Victorian era, Anna Despotopoulou writes, “emphasized the importance of restricting a bourgeois girl’s/woman’s impulses through enforced domestication and covert disciplining tactics like constant surveillance, which ensured the safety of a young woman and by extension the safeguarding of Victorian gender and moral ideology” (434). The young woman has much more to lose via interaction with a man. The sense that she is being observed at all times would cultivate an attitude of constant vigilance, coloring even relatively innocent interactions. A girl alone in the garden with a man without the watchful eyes of those who
would protect her may be enough to cause doubt about her purity and thus safety. The young reader would likely understand the misbehavior represented in the illustration and be encouraged to avoid temptation, at least on the surface. However, the presence of other flower poems in the book which celebrate the rose, as well as the playful language in “blushes rosy red,” makes being the lily look a bit boring. The rose, although it must “hang its head,” is a more exciting bloom.

The metaphorical meaning of color is explored again in Rossetti’s poem about, on the surface, curtains.

Crimson curtains round my mother’s bed, Silken soft as may be

Cool white curtains round my bed
For I am but a baby.

(126)
The crimson curtain surrounding the mother’s bed could be seen as representative of the passion and sexuality that is part of a marital relationship and is contrasted by the white purity of the baby’s bed. The illustration accompanying the small poem shows the mother and child’s bed in the same physical space, with the child kneeling on the smaller bed, praying. There is a heart hung on the wall above the mother’s bed further indicating the connection between motherhood, marriage, love and sexuality. The little girl praying is an overt image of purity. There seems no clearer image of innocence than a nightdress-wearing girl praying on her white curtained bed. There seems to be a boundary created between the mother and daughter, one which makes clear that the sexual self is not meant for the girl to consider or explore but belongs fully in the adult realm of the mother.
CHAPTER 5. SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN SING-SONG

Many poems in my analysis center on the treatment and situations of vulnerable beings both people and animals. These poems work on two levels, the most obvious of which is that these poems provide a lesson on kindness and obligation. They also, as the woman walking in the snow illustrates, provide a caution or warning about the ways that a girl/woman may be taken advantage of and left vulnerable and alone. The woman and child in the first poem are simply imagined and left; no one within the poem intervenes. We are, as the audience, simply observing, and likely, as would be expected of a young reader, having an emotional reaction to the situation portrayed. The next poem illustrates a similar scene but from another perspective, one which provides the reader with a particular direction or lesson on ways to behave and feel, if faced with a similar situation.

There’s snow on the fields
And cold in the cottage
While I sit in the chimney nook
Supping hot pottage.

My clothes are soft and warm
Fold upon fold.
But I’m so sorry for the poor
Out there in the cold.

In this poem the presence of snow is again providing the reader, particularly a child reader, with a sense of the world outside the safety of home as unwelcoming. The wintery cold elicits a much different feeling than is present in other poems that seem to celebrate nature in its more temperate moods. If in the first poem we are only observing the woman in the cold, this poem, in the voice of a child, invites the child to take on the “I” of the piece, personally. As no specific poor person is portrayed, only a general “the poor,” the reader is invited to imagine himself or herself as the speaker and to empathize with the perspective of
the child poet. The lesson is much more explicit in this poem; it is good both to be grateful and to feel sympathetic. The middle-class (or at least not poor) child is grateful for the warmth of the chimney nook, the simple bowl of pottage and the soft clothing, an acknowledgement that would often been taken for granted. But the child cannot be fully happy with her/his pleasures as indicated by the “But” in the start of line seven. “But I’m so sorry for the poor” creates a sense that for a sophisticated child reader, the lives of the poor and the more privileged are connected. One can impact the other, even if it is only in sparking a feeling of sorrow or pity, and not a real call to action.

The next poem uses a metaphorical lamb to push the feeling of sadness or pity for those “out there in the snow” into an action.

A motherless soft lambkin
   Alone upon a hill;
No mother’s fleece to shelter him
   And wrap him from the cold:
   I’ll run to him and fetch him, that I will;
   I’ll care for him and feed him
   Until he’s strong and bold.

(3)

This poem uses a Victorian, and childhood, belief in the importance of motherhood to portray a particularly vulnerable lambkin. This poem, again, works on multiple levels. A child reader would understand that the worst calamity to befall a lamb, or a human child, is the loss of the mother, and Victorian culture would also see the loss of a mother, the child’s moral teacher and kindest ally, to be an irreplaceable loss. To be left alone is the greatest fear of childhood.

If we see the lamb as truly a lamb, a literal reading, than the poem is about kindness to animals, another preoccupation of the Victorians, particularly women. The anti-vivisection movement was extremely active in the late 19th century. From a speech given by Mary Lovell at the National Council of Women Conference in 1895: "Will you, with the
chivalry which belongs to good and true womanhood, side with the suffering and the helpless? This wrong will never be righted until women do their part” (Buettenger 857). Although there were men and members of the clergy recruited to the cause of animal rights, the overwhelming membership, especially by the 1890s, was that of “hundreds of middle-class women” (Buettenger 857). Although this poem is not, of course, about animal vivisection it does represent, at least on the surface, a value of the Victorian middle-class woman, kindness to animals -- a value that often re-occurs thematically throughout Sing-Song.

However, the lambkin could also be understood, metaphorically, as a human child or as any vulnerable creature, orphaned. There are parallels between “Crying my little one” (p. 22) and this portrait of an orphaned lamb, but the poems differ: there is intervention here on behalf of the lamb, while the mother and baby are left to wander in the snow. The “I” of this poem, perhaps in the voice of a child, saves the lamb from what would almost certainly be death. The cold of the natural world fails to offer any protection and instead represents the vulnerability of the unprotected one, the other dangers that could befall a lambkin “alone upon a hill” implied. The speaker in the poem runs to fetch him, assuring him a future, where he is “strong and bold.” In this case, the child is able and willing to do more than feel sad, and is capable of acting, a much more powerful position.

The gender of the speaker in this and “There’s Snow on the Fields” is unknown. However, the illustrations accompanying both poems depict a young female as the implied speaker. If the speaker is female, this poem gains additional feminist weight in that it seems to imply that there is important work to be done by girls and that they are capable of action that makes a difference, literally in the life of the lambkin and metaphorically on behalf of any injured party or cause. This message echoes the sentiment of Lovell’s speech, reminding women to “remember their moral accountability” and act on behalf of the helpless.
Although Rossetti includes few direct references to religion in this book, it is difficult to ignore the potential metaphorical significance of the Lamb of God, Christ, implied in this piece. Encouraging the child reader to save the lamb seems, then, additionally significant, as He, who is the Savior of Man, is saved by a little girl.

In this series of poems featuring animals, in my interpretation the images come to represent the situations and common vulnerabilities of women and girls. Rossetti’s consistent use of soft, kind, even at times baby, animals reads as particularly feminine. The symbols of birds, in particular, have often been understood as a metaphor for women, caged birds, free birds, birds without flight. The often-made connection or closeness between women and nature, as in an eco-feminist perspective, accounts for this interpretation of the text. The animals chosen seem to convey a certain type of docile and vulnerable character that would be particularly useful in portraying the ideal Victorian woman and child. Sheep and lambs, also frequently used by Rossetti, are gentle and exposed in such a way that they require another’s care. Sheep, in theory and not in practice, are sweet and soft and not particularly bright. The poems are successful at “assimilating little women to little birds and beasts” and in doing this, “Rossetti aligns maternity to nature” (Smulders 105). In some poems, images of motherhood appear among the animals, while in others the young reader is encouraged to act maternally to a vulnerable creature, thus practicing the proper natural behavior for future motherhood.

In the following short poem appearing as the first piece in *Sing-Song*, the metaphor is made clear. The reader is to understand that the mother, the speaker in the poem, is comparing her “pretty babe” to a “curly lamb”. The lamb-like baby is protected in its crib by angels on all sides, representing another way the vulnerable are protected, by a spiritual presence.
Angels at the foot,
And Angels at the head,
And like a curly little lamb
My pretty babe in bed.
(1).

In the same way that a lamb is used as a replacement for the baby, there is a similar comparison being made in other poems about birds. This time the metaphor works to represent women or girls. Although the poems are both about kindness to animals, there is also a dangerous other representation to the treatment of animals that in the metaphorical space represent a caution to protect oneself, or alternatively to be aware of the always-hovering possibility of destruction.

Hear what the mournful linnets say:
“We built our nest compact and warm,
But cruel boys came round our way
And took our summerhouse by storm.

“They crushed the eggs so neatly laid;
So now we sit with drooping wing,
And watch the ruin they have made,
Too late to build, too sad to sing.
(14)

The metaphor is more quickly made in this piece as the linnets speak in the voice of mothers, whose eggs were crushed. This poem can still work as literally being a message to young readers about kindness to animals. In imagining that the birds are “too sad to sing,” a child would likely feel sympathy for the birds and would be, hopefully, less likely to carelessly destroy a nest. The more interesting interpretation comes when one can imagine the linnets as representational of women/girls. The “cruel boys” who “crushed the eggs so neatly laid” are the first appearance of the villain, the action threatened by the cold and the snow in the previous poems now done. The metaphorical possibilities of the eggs, of new life and hope
for the future, are destroyed by the careless boys who are then free to continue in their happy play, while the linnets, like the fallen woman, are left to deal with the devastation wrought. The nest, much like the nursery or the home, represents a space apart, a safe haven from the dangers of the world. But as with the poor linnets, sometimes disaster befalls even the most warm and compact summerhouse, no matter how neatly the eggs within are laid. If a woman or girl is in danger via her own sexual awakening, she is equally in danger of being an unwilling victim of violence, sexual or otherwise. It matters little whether or not a woman was a willing participant in the misdeed or a victim of the violence of a “cruel boy.” The damage to one’s life is the same.

The ending of this poem is curious for the genre of children’s work. There is no hope left for the ruined birds, no redemption or fixing. It is too late to fix things. It is too sad to sing. This lesson is not one often found in children’s literature, though perhaps the hopelessness is temporary. Is a reader to understand that sometimes “cruel boys” ruin things beyond repair? What does this say then about the implication of a ruined (fallen) woman, whose hopes are dashed by these same cruel boys?

Next, Rossetti contemplates the luck of the caged bird, and the safety from those “cruel boys” acting upon the other birds.

A linnet in a gilded cage –
A linnet on a bough, -
In frosty winter one might doubt
Which bird is luckier now.

But let the trees burst out in leaf,
And nests be on the bough,
Which linnet is the luckier bird,
Oh who could doubt it now?

(21)

This poem, again, works on two levels. The first is a comment on the possible cruelty of caging a bird, though it seems unlikely that the linnet, a variety of European finch,
would be often caged. In the second, considering a feminist reading, one could read in the poem a metaphor on the situation of women in Victorian England. In searching for greater independence in society, the right to own property after divorce for instance, women were entering into a space that was untested. Would it really prove better for women to have more freedom, to be outside the confines of roles related to men, daughter and wife? This question was unanswered by Victorian women’s experience and was likely something that Rossetti was struggling to reconcile for herself. The cold of “frosty winter,” as in many other *Sing-Song* poems, represents the hardships and troubles of the outside world. A caged bird, or a protected married woman, a coddled and supervised daughter, might have the benefit of the safety from the winter, and a beautiful gilded circumstance in which to enjoy captivity, but never the joy found in the trees “bursting out in leaf”, a potential metaphor for the blooming of the sexual self. Rossetti seems to conclude that the free linnet is the luckier bird in the end which offers interesting conclusions if seen in the metaphorical space of representing a women’s relationships and freedoms.

Rossetti did not enter the “gilded cage” of marriage, although much of the speculation regarding her reasons to remain single was related to religious piety rather than a “feminist” desire for freedom from patriarchy. However, as she gained perspective, it is possible she saw her path, outside the role of mother and wife, as “luckier.” Although she never entered the convent or became a literal bride of Christ, like her sister Maria did, Rossetti perhaps came to see a relationship with a husband as less fulfilling than one with God.
CHAPTER 6. TEMPTATION AND DISCIPLINE IN

*SPEAKING LIKENESSES*

There are many common thematic elements between *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses*: the presence of the vulnerable innocent animals as metaphors for the precarious situation of girlhood, the difficulties of the poor, and the insistence on obedience being rewarded. *Speaking Likenesses* is divided into three parts, each telling the story of one of three girls, Flora, Edith, and Maggie, through the framing medium of an aunt who invents them, supposedly from her vivid imagination, for her nieces. The girls, at their aunt's command, sew, draw, and darn (appropriately female pursuits) while listening and interjecting questions and suggestions. The device of the story-telling aunt, a kind of mother figure, as explained by Despotopoulou, “aims at satirizing the disciplining tactics used . . . to tame the impulses of children. With her monitoring of her nieces’ activities, the aunt performs all the protective measures that serve to construct boundaries around female behaviour from infancy onwards” (432). The horrible things that befall the fictional girls are meant to provide a lesson on the dangers of entering the wider world unprepared. In *Speaking Likenesses*, the aunt, Despotopoulou goes on to write, “creates fantastical childlike figures which become warnings of the psychological, physical, and social disasters that may befall an aberrant girl” (433).

The story of Maggie is the final one in the book and has the most in common with *Sing-Song* in examining it through the particular focus of this paper. The story is a variation of a Red Riding Hood tale with the protagonist, Maggie, facing the, typical to fairy tale, three challenges or temptations before being rewarded for her goodness and obedience at the conclusion of the piece. This story, interestingly, focuses on a poor girl, orphaned and being
taken care of by her generous grandmother, Old Dame Margaret. The first two stories in the book focus on middle class girls who aren’t nearly as good or kind as Maggie, and who are met with suitable, if rather exaggerated and horrible, punishments. These stories showcase poor behavior: being too bossy at your birthday party, for instance, and then provide a lesson for the girl and the listeners. Maggie’s story contains no lessons of behavior to avoid but instead offers an example of perfect restraint and kindness that the Victorian girl, Rossetti appears to believe, would do well to follow.

Maggie’s grandmother owns a toy store, though she herself is a woman of simple tastes and modest means. Her description and example of simplicity, generosity and discernment appear as ideals in Maggie’s behavior as she faces challenges throughout her story. Maggie must have learned from her Granny, who is described in this way:

Dame Margaret was no fine lady, but a nice simple old woman who wore plain clothes and made them last a long time; and thus it was that over and over again she found money to give or lend among her needy neighbors . . . though she was very cautious as to helping idlers who refused to help themselves or drunkards who would only do more harm with more money.

(72)

On Christmas Eve, the doctor’s family visits the store and accidentally leaves behind a package of candles, toys, crackers and Christmas chocolates. Maggie volunteers to travel through the woods to the doctor’s house, in hopes of getting a glimpse of their opulent Christmas tree, and sets off, having received strict instructions from Granny to return before dark. Maggie promises that she will not stop to play along the way, and unlike Red Riding Hood, she, of good character, insists on keeping her promise.

The good character of Maggie seems to have much to do with the simplicity of her upbringing and generosity of her caregiver. She is in the most vulnerable position imaginable for a young girl, orphaned and of little means, but still, or perhaps because of this, manages to be more moral than the other girls in the book whose pettiness and disobedience lead
them into trouble. Despotopoulou writes about this issue of class, concluding,

With her juxtaposition of two different social contexts, middle and working class, in which little girls grow up, Rossetti is testing out the degrees of independence granted to young girls of different classes, questioning the middle-class fear and suspicion of a girl's/woman's autonomy. Both social settings described disrupt Victorian expectations concerning impulses, behavior, and degrees of safety that each one fosters.

(22)

While there is danger outside the safety of the home, for the linnets and girls of Sing-Song and Speaking Likenesses, the working-class girl depicted in the final story as a kind of example fares the best. This depiction could be read as a critique of the middle-class and its child rearing practices. So, while a middle-class girl may have the advantage of (male) protection, of coddling and surveillance, that protection may result in a less developed moral compass and a girl who is more than a bit spoiled. The upper-class doctor's family, to whom Maggie delivers the package, is depicted as cold and uncaring, not even allowing Maggie a glimpse at the tree and sending her away with little acknowledgment. They, like many middle and upper class families, were oftentimes oblivious to the difficulties of the poor or at least did little to be charitable. Their lack of acknowledgement not only draws the attention of the girl-reader to their mistake, but also points again to Rossetti's lesson of action on behalf of the poor in Sing-Song repeated here in prose.

When Maggie begins her journey she slips on a “loose lump of ice” and then begins what may be a hallucination, an explanation for the odd events about to unfold in the winter woods. She is first met by a group of rowdy children playing in a clearing. Although the reader sees the threat of these supernatural children clearly, Maggie yearns to join them. “If they had not been children they must have inevitably been grasshoppers . . . . They tossed each other about like balls” (81). Maggie wants to join them “having had no playfellows at home” and is invited by the “monstrous” children to join in. She agrees before remembering
her “promise to make haste – her fatal promise - as it seemed to her” (81).

She resumes her walk to next encounter a pair of wood pigeons who are hungry and pecking at the ground. For the second time in only a few pages of text the hungry birds are brought to the reader’s attention. The birds, pecked along the frozen path, but could not find even one mouthful for their little empty beaks: then hopeless and silent, they fluttered up and perched on twig above her head. The sight of these hungry creatures made Maggie hungry from sympathy; yet it was rather for their sakes than for her own that she lifted the cover of her basket.

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The chocolate inside was for the doctor’s girls but she was ready to offer it, when a boy came up behind her and insisted that Maggie give him her chocolate. The boy, posing as a poor beggar, was hardly a boy at all, but instead a giant mouth. “He had indeed arms, legs, a head, like ordinary people: but his face exhibited only one feature, and that was a wide mouth” (84). Maggie refuses to give him the chocolate insisting that he is not in fact hungry or poor, but instead “looked a great deal stouter and sleeker than she herself did” (86). She “spoke so resolutely and seemed altogether so determined” that the boy disappears into the shadows leaving Maggie free to continue on her journey, again remembering her promise to make haste.

This episode seems, just as in Sing-Song, to illustrate a comparison or sympathy between the girl and the birds, which metaphorically suggests a likeness. Her understanding of, or perhaps, reading into, the birds’ hungry behavior as it mirrors her own provides the same example of kindness that Rossetti encourages in her nursery rhymes. Maggie does the
right thing by responding to the birds’ hopelessness even though it meant taking a bit from the chocolate bar intended for the doctor’s girls. The scene is never complete so we do not see whether Maggie’s desire to help the birds or her insistence on completing her delivery would prevail. However, what seems most important, in terms of a lesson, is that Maggie’s desire to help the birds comes from her attention and empathic view to their situation.

Both interactions with the children in the woods force Maggie to choose obedience over any more urgent instinct, the desire to have fun with the children in the first, and next, her fear of the giant-mouth boy. Both situations offer a temptation that she must conquer. What is interesting in each of these scenarios is that Maggie must save herself through the use of her own voice. Remembering the promise she made to her grandmother helps her to do the right thing, but more significantly for a feminist reading of the text, she is able to be her own protector against temptation and danger as opposed to a more powerful male or adult figure. What all three stories have in common, Despotopoulou writes, “is the absence of adults from this imaginary site where children venture into the unknown, embarking on a quest to prove their independence” (434). What they all encounter “is an anarchist world of savage impulses, violence, and absurdity, in which rather than independence, survival becomes the main concern” (Despotopoulou 434). However, Maggie alone is able to be “strong and resolute” even through her desires and mixed emotions. If one is to carry this same message to an adult or less fantastic world, through the power to conquer sexual temptation, to walk away from that which seems pleasurable, and not to feed the giant hungry mouth as represented by the boy in the woods, one may eventually be rewarded.

The final episode in the woods finds cold and hungry Maggie encountering a “glowing gipsy fire” with some “persons sitting toasting themselves around it, yawning in nightcaps or dropping asleep” (88). Although no one says a single word to Maggie, she is
tempted by her own desire to sleep by the fire, or in larger and more significant sense, to give up on what has been a difficult journey, giving in to her desire to rest. Each of the temptations represents the kind of susceptibility even a very young girl would find to fall into sin, sexual or otherwise. In order to be a good girl, to live up to a moral standard, she must be able to resist, to be vigilant at every moment and to turn away from anything that leads to too much pleasure. “The stories suggest that woman’s nature is from a very young age socially and medically constructed as susceptible to falling, and only very few female communities can withstand such constructions” (Despotopoulou 435). Maggie resists. At last she arrives on the doctor’s doorstep, waiting and hoping to see the Christmas tree, something she is not fortunate enough to have, and to be warmed by the fire. “Alas, no! The door opened, the parcel was taken in with a brief ‘Thank you,’ and Maggie remained shut out on the sanded doorstep” (91).

About to cry, Maggie begins the long journey home. As she revisits the scenes of each of her tempting encounters she finds a vulnerable or injured animal, which is seen almost as a magical reward for her successful obedience. First, she finds a wood-pigeon, “which lay motionless and half frozen in her hand. She snuggled it tenderly to her, and kissed its poor little beak and drooping head before she laid it to her to get warm within the bosom of her frock” (92). Next, she encounters a feeble kitten “crouched all alone against the gnarled root of an oak, which mewed and mewed and seemed to beg for aid. Maggie caught up the helpless creature, popped it into her basket and hurried forward” (93). When she arrives at the clearing where the children played, her “foot stuck against some soft lump” that turned out to be a smooth puppy, friendly and eager for attention. “Who could leave such a puppy all abroad on such a night? Not Maggie, for one” (94).

The saving of the innocent, left behind, “orphaned” creatures is symbolic of
Maggie’s own redemption from her difficult circumstances. Although she is a poor girl alone in a wood on a cold night, she has the power to save the vulnerable, just as her grandmother had helped her and just as the mother/reader and child would be expected to see their own power to help those less fortunate. Maggie’s self-sufficiency is rewarded with the acquisition of three little animals which as Briggs has argued, are “associated with the spiritual, physical, and social needs of the child . . . the dove . . . corresponds to the child’s need for spiritual sustenance, the kitten to her need for food and physical nurture, and the puppy to her need for companionship and play” (Briggs 218).

Not only does Maggie save the animals and thus gain play-friends when before she had none, but she receives a spiritual reward as well. After the pigeon rests on her chest, “lying there, it seemed to draw anger and discontent out of her heart: and soon she left off grumbling to herself, and stepped forward with renewed energy, because the sooner the pigeon could be taken safe indoors out of the cold, the better” (92). Maggie finds that in helping the pigeon that she is also helped, a lesson for the reader on the value of charity to animals, literally, but also to the less fortunate and poor as well.

The lesson of Sing-Song’s “motherless lambkin” reoccurs here in the growing maternal spirit within the girls. The power in acting as a mother, in caring more for someone/something else’s well being, allows one’s miserable circumstance to recede. Through caring for another, Maggie is rewarded and renewed. Although there is no lost lamb among the animals Maggie saves, there are the parallels between Sing-Song’s vulnerable animal life and Speaking Likenesses’. Both are assumed to have
feelings of abandonment and gratefulness. Both situations represent a child-sized version of the larger social issues facing the Victorians in regard to the poor and fallen. Rossetti’s message could be interpreted as insisting that the vulnerable, abandoned and forgotten deserve attention and care and that doing so promotes a feeling of well-being in both parties.

When Maggie arrives home she is received with a “loving welcoming hug; and not only what she carried, but she herself also found plenty of light and warmth awaiting all arrivals, in a curtained parlour set out for tea.” Maggie, the pigeon, kitten and puppy all warm themselves, drinking warm milk, in the safety of the simple home before falling asleep under Granny’s watchful eye.

The homecoming is the ending of the text. The aunt never re-enters to close the story or complete the framing of the piece. Maggie drifting off to sleep, having successfully survived the challenges of the woods, is perhaps exactly the picture that Rossetti wanted to leave her readers with. Despotopoulou argues that in this final picture resides an encapsulation of Rossetti’s desire for the future of women and girls in society:

Maggie epitomizes Rossetti’s realism and hope: this little girl conceptualizes, on the one hand, childhood at risk by domestic abandonment, child labour, and poverty and, on the other, hope of resistance, endurance, and survival. The community of Maggie and her grandmother is indeed utopic.

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Interestingly, all that is needed to create a home, in Maggie’s case, is the grandmother and Maggie. There is no father or brother or nanny. The self-sufficiency of the two together and the safety and warmth of their home seem to suggest a kind of ideal completeness that is entirely female. A may represent the kind of sweet companionship perhaps enjoyed by Rossetti and her own mother.
CHAPTER 7. GOOD NIGHT

It is likely that in a quiet bedroom tonight, the lights are dimmed and the blankets are pulled back. A child might pick from their bookshelf Rossetti’s Sing-Song and a mother might read one these familiar nursery rhymes to a sleepy daughter. Are the stories in Speaking Likenesses still relevant for a mother and child in 2011? The barriers and social expectations for women and girls are not the same as they were for a Victorian audience, but frequently, the nursery still remains a contested space, one that is both powerful and powerless, a place where lessons are taught and learned and where mothers hope to instill in their children enough goodness to survive what awaits them. The companionship found in these relationships between mothers and daughters, and by extension, the relationships between sisters, aunts, nannies and grandmothers, is portrayed in Rossetti’s books for children as both an escape, a respite from the dangers of the outside world, and a place where one is never really allowed to grow up. The safety found in these relationships provides a tempting place to remain. Rossetti’s Sing-Song and Speaking Likenesses show us a world where mothers are protectors and girls have the ability to ward off danger in the woods using only the power of their own sweet voices if guided by the right motivations. What remains constant in nurseries tonight is the sense that cleverly written work for children are not just books, that often they have something more to say under the surface for a children and for an adult audience who listens.
WORKS CITED


