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FANTASTIC METAMORPHOSES AND THE SUBVERSION OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *SPEAKING LIKENESSES*[1]

CHRİSTİNA ROSSETTİ'NİN SPEAKING LIKENESSES (“KONUŞAN SURETLER”) *ADLI ESERİNDE FANTASTİK BAŞKALAŞIMLAR VE GELENEKSEL CİNSİYET ROLLERİNİN TERS-DÜZ EDİLMESİ*

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Abstract

Regarded as “a peculiarly revolting book” by the Times Literary Supplement, Christina Rossetti's Speaking Likenesses (1874) consists of three different stories that are woven together as one through a frame story. Inspired by Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and its sequence, Through the Looking Glass, in these stories, Rossetti aims at revealing the least attractive side of each of its child-characters through fantastic transformations. To this end, the characters, particularly in the first and the last stories, encounter their strangely disfigured doppelgangers who reflect the flaws and short-comings of their originals. Written in an age when radical transformations were taking place within the society which accordingly triggered the rise of Victorian Medieval Revival, Rossetti's interest in fairy tales is quite significant. Although at first glance the stories seem to re-affirm conventional gender roles, the frame story denies such a claim through the mockery of the Aunt; the story-teller. Rossetti, through the Aunt satirises the double standards that are at work for men and women in the Victorian society. Additionally, through the stories, Rossetti criticises Victorian interest in social Darwinism which necessitates that the fittest survives at the expense of the weakest; that is men at the expense of women, and upholds religious moral codes.
To conclude, in Speaking Likenesses, Rossetti satirises the double standards of the society in terms of their expectations regarding “proper” masculine and feminine conduct. By way of her employment of the fantastic metamorphoses, she liberates women from their sexual as well as socio-economic victimisation in the Victorian society.

Öz

Times Literary Supplement tarafından “alışılmışın dışında uygunsuz bir kitap” olarak nitelendirilen Christina Rossetti'nin Speaking Likenesses (1874, “Konuşan Suretler”) adlı eseri, bir çerçeve hikaye tarafından iç içe örülmüş üç farklı hikayeden oluşmaktadır. Lewis Carroll'ın Alice Harikalar Diyarında ve Aynanın İçinden adlı kitaplarından ilham alan Rossetti, fantastik değişimlere uğrattığı çocuk kahramanlarına kendilerinin en az sevilen yönlerini göstermeyi amaç edinir. Bu bağlamda, özellikle ilk ve son hikayelerdeki karakterler, tuhaf bir şekilde biçimleri bozulmuş kendilerine benzeyen ikizlerinin kusur ve noksanlıklarıyla aslında kendileriyle yüzleşirler. Toplumdaki radikal değişimlerin, sonuç olarak Viktoryen Ortaçağ Dirilişi'ne sebep olduğu bir dönemde yazılmış olan bu eser, Rossetti'nin peri masallarına olan ilgisi açısından oldukça önemlidir. İlk bakışta hikayeler geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini destekler görünse de çerçeve hikâye, hikâye anlatıcısı Teyze karakteriyle alay ederek bu savı yerle bir eder. Rossetti, Teyze karakteri aracılığıyla Viktorya toplumunda kadınlar ve erkekler için farklı işleyen çifte standartları hicveder. Ek olarak, bu hikayeler yoluyla Rossetti, Viktorya Dönemi'nde ortaya çıkan ve uyum sağlayabilenin zayıf olanı yok ederek var olmasını; yani erkeğin toplumda kadını yok ederek var olmasını, gerektiren sosyal Darwinism'ine olan ilgiyi eleştirerek dinsel ahlaki öğretileri savunur.
Sonuç olarak, Speaking Likeness (“Konuşan Suretler”) adlı eserinde Rossetti, toplumun eril ve dişiler için “münasip” olarak nitelediği davranışları toplumun çifte standartları bağlamında eleştirir. Fantastik dönüşümler yoluyla kadınları, Viktorya toplumunun cinsel ve sosyo-ekonomik mağduriyetlerinden kurtarır.

[1] This article is an abridged version of the second chapter of my unpublished MA thesis entitled “The Use of Fantasy and the Representation of Social Reality in Christina Rossetti's Works.” It is also a revised and abbreviated version of a study presented at Reading the Fantastic: Tales Beyond Borders Conference organised at the University of Leeds in 2015.

Fairy tales received attention from several British writers in the nineteenth century due to the Victorian Medieval Revival, which was triggered by German and English Romanticism. Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), George MacDonald (1824-1905), William Morris (1834-1896) and Andrew Lang (1844-1912) all produced works of fantasy in their careers. George MacDonald in *Phantastes* (1858) and *The Princess and The Goblin* (1872), Charles Kingsley in *The Water Babies* (1863), Lewis Carroll in (1898-1963) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) and William Morris in *The Well at the World's End* (1896) presented their dissatisfaction with the problematic issues of the Victorian society individually behind the veil of fantasy[2].

Most of the nineteenth-century literary figures, particularly the poets, were inspired by chapbooks as well as translations from German and French fairy tales and the *Arabian Nights* (Zipes 863). Consequently, various Victorian poets employed the fantastic as a mode in their own works during the period whether they be poets of the mainstream, such as Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, whom Hyles refers to as *"the staid Victorians [who are] strayed into the shadowy realm of the supernatural;"* or of miscellaneous groups such as the Pre-Raphaelites, of which leading figure was Dante Gabriel Rossetti; the Aesthetes, who were headed by Oscar Wilde, or the Orientalists, among whom Edward Fitzgerald was best known (5). Egoff, too, refers to the popularity of fairy tales during the Victorian Age as follows:

> Fairy tales were gradually becoming respectable. Aside from their hold on children through chapbooks, other influences were working on their behalf. All the great writers of this long period, ranging from Shakespeare and Spenser through Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson (and his Boswell), Addison, Steele, Charles Lamb, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Dickens, showed a knowledge of fairy tales and in many cases remarked on their love of them as children (32).

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[2] In his essay "On Fairy Stories" (1939) written for *Andrew Lang Lecture* at St Andrews University in Scotland, J. R. R. Tolkien identifies the fantast as a sub-creator of "a Secondary World," which inspires "Secondary Belief" in the reader (146). In contrast, Tzvetan Todorov studying the fantastic as a mode in his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970) suggests that the *fantastique* "seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny" (41). In the case of the uncanny, the supernatural is "explained" whereas in the marvellous it is "accepted" (Todorov 41-42). Thus, although fantasy as a genre necessitates the creation of an other world with its own plausible rules and regulations, the fantastic as a mode does not require the existence of such. Therefore, genres closely associated with fantasy, e.g. fairy tales, gothic, utopian and dystopian literature, magical realism etc., make use of the fantastic without being necessarily identified as works of fantasy generically.

The thing that triggered widespread use of fantasy both as a genre and as a mode enabling the writers who felt imprisoned a way out during the Victorian Age was that England had gone through a radical change. In terms of socio-political developments and economics, the aim of authors using the fantastic in their works was to represent *"another world and another age far away from [this world's] cares"* (Houghton 332). Colin Matthew summarising the condition of the age states that *"[p]ower and success oozed from Victorian Britain: a dominant economy, a worldwide empire and banking system, an unassailed fleet and most of the world's merchant shipping, a 'race' transplanted across the globe, a political and social system whose stability astonished Europeans;"* all of which came at a price (1).

One of the crucial results of the Industrial Revolution was the rise of an economically and politically powerful middle class. As the embodiment of Samuel Smile's idea of the "self-made man," the highly individualistic middle-class gentleman derived his *"power from wealth rather than from aristocratic birth"* (Sussman 247-248). Thus, the ages-old system, on top of which had been the aristocrats, was shattered by the new one as a consequence of which the rising bourgeoisie started to move upward on the social ladder. With better economic conditions, the middle classes started to buy education and learn manners on their way to be counted as equals with the aristocrats. However, their rise on the social ladder correspondingly meant the equally new working class' conditions to get worse. As a result, while Britain of the early 1850s was economically more integrated,

> in other aspects it was much less unified. Improved communications and the advance of industrialization might be breaking down some divisions, but they were putting others in their place. One consequence of the Industrial Revolution was to sharpen and generalize distinctions of social class. Disraeli, in his literary, Young England, phase in the 1940s, famously dramatized the difference between classes in his novel *Sybil* (1844) as a division between 'Two Nations – the Rich and the Poor'. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), wrote of the ever-widening gulf between bourgeoisie and proletariat which, they predicted, must lead inevitably to revolution (Powell 38-39).

Briefly, the division between the classes, rather than being reduced, unfortunately widened and also showed itself in a division of the country into, *"in Gaskell's terms, an industrial north and an agricultural south"* (Sussman 252). As Powell states:

> In the 1830s and 1840s, however, Disraelian class divisions were arguably less important than the division – part geographical, part economic, part psychological – summed up in the title of Mrs Gaskell's novel, *North and South* (1855). The novel explored the differences between the rural south of England and the industrial north, acknowledging that there were conflicts within industrial society (notably between masters and men) while reflecting the reality that there was an even more profound divide between the industrial and the non-industrial parts of the country (39).

The rise of a powerful middle class and a weak working class were plain indicators of the results of the Darwinian theory as applied to the industrial Victorian society. Identified by Herbert Spencer as social Darwinism, the idea encouraged "competition and survival" as the necessary means for materialistic ends (qtd. in Hughes 43). Thus, natural selection, which was based on the idea of the survival of the fittest, caused the formation of a society which was governed by self-interest only:

> Men and classes were no longer integral parts of a Christian-feudal organism where everyone had his recognized place and function and was united to Church and State by established rights and duties. In the new liberal theory all men were free, politically and economically, owing no one any service beyond the fufillment of legal constructs; and society was simply a collection of individuals, each motivated – naturally and rightly – by self interest (Houghton 77).

Because of these reasons, Sussman maintains that *"[m]agic and fantasy provided the only rhetoric"* of the age, when the age itself was full of magic with all the technological and social developments coming to life that would not be dreamed of earlier (252). In a way, during the Victorian Age when everything seemed possible and major changes occurred within the society, fantastic works proved to be all-too believable. As Lüthi puts forward: "*In the fairy tale, all things are possible, not just in the sense that all sorts of miracle occur, but in the sense [..] [that]: the lowest can rise to the highest position and those in the highest position [..] can fall and be destroyed"*

(138). Another reason for the popularity of fairy tales during the Victorian Age was due to their appeal to the taste of the newly emerged middle-class men who won their rights by hard work, self-scheming acts and might –just like popular fairy-tale heroes. Thus, the tales portraying either *"the victory of the humble over the mighty"* (Lüthi 98) or *"the limits of an individual hero in an unheroic age"* came to represent the spirit of the age (Poston 11). According to Houghton, in an age of radical transition when men are caught in between various clashing ideas, the search for a hero with supernatural powers is all too natural (310).

For centuries, fairy tales and women are closely associated due to their maternal roles and the secondary place attributed to them within the society. The relation between them dates back to the Middle Ages, when, failing to prevent fantasy works from circulating, the Church continued its negative propaganda either by stigmatizing these or by feminizing them. According to Zipes, *"[i]f women were regarded as the originators and disseminators of these tales, then the texts themselves had to be suspicious, for they might reflect the fickle, duplicitous, wild, and erotic character of women, who were not to be trusted. Thus, their stories were not to be trusted"* (850). Contrary to the Church's assumptions however, *"for girls and women, in particular, the fairy tale's magic has assumed the contradictory form of being both a spiritual enclave supported by old wives' wisdom and an exquisitely glittery feminine kingdom"* progressively (Bacchilega 5). In this sense, fairy tales and fantasy literature in general supplied women with something unattainable in other genres. Fantasy offered women the freedom and immunity they have been seeking, since they are both *"outside the culturally defined norm; both are Other"* (Attebery ix).

On account of the fact that the genres associated with fantasy, such as nursery rhyme, fairy tale and folk tale, do not necessitate proper classical learning but observational skills combined with daily experience, women have been allowed to dominate these genres for centuries and within the boundaries of fantasy they gave freedom to their imagination. However, this changed dramatically during the nineteenth century when the *"male writer's sentimental return to a myth of matriarchal origins was for the woman writer a colonization of one of the few literary spheres she was allowed to consider her own"* (Auerbach and Knoepflmacher 7). Due to the popularity of fairy tales, men started to invade this feminine territory which soon, however, was followed by women's reclamation of it.

Specifically, Victorian fantasy works produced by women projected this recovery as they attributed different functions to the fantasy works of the period. As is pointed out by Spivack: *"One of the main currents in nineteenth-century literature is the desire to escape from the limitations of actuality and to forsake, at least imaginatively, the mundanity of the commonplace. Hence the popularity of the Gothic novel in this era, especially among women writers"* (57). Taking the woman question which emerged during the Victorian Age into consideration, it is noteworthy that Jackson's idea of fantasy as subversion, as an attack upon the male symbolic order, has much to offer to the Victorian women writers who consequently made use of fantasy and grotesque in their works, too (103). Previously frowned upon, women writing fantasy *"suffered from double bias, against women and against fantasy,"* yet they certainly found fantasy as a safe harbour where they had the authority; a place where they were not forced to have any pseudonyms or carry the fear of lack of autonomy for the very same reason (Spivack 63). Among these authoresses Dinah Marie Mulock, Mrs. Juliana Horatia Ewing, Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow and Juliana Horatia Ewing can be named.

Of these writers, particularly Christina Rossetti projects the injustices she has observed in the Victorian society, such as the inequality between men and women, the rich and the poor, the poet and the poetess, within the domains of her fantasy worlds. Beneath the surface layer of Rossetti's works, which relied on fantastic metamorphoses to liberate women from traditionally assigned feminine roles, serious social issues are discussed and satirised. Sexual and social victimisation of women are thus prevented through Rossetti's employment of the fantastic in her works. Transformation in Rossetti's stories, then, occurs as a sexual liberation standing against social Darwinism, gender inequality, dominant social roles and, in short, against essentialism. Thus, the purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of the fantastic in Rossetti's works and to uncover how it relates to constructions and representations of gender by challenging Victorian stereotypes of femininity.

Confined to their domestic spheres, women were not allowed to play any other role than the "angel in the house" within the Victorian society (Patmore 1723). Ironically working-class women had more freedom and authority since it was common to see them carry out the family business in the economic sphere (Howarth 169-171). Two other professions that were common among women were working as "governesses" or as "prostitutes" –neither of which won the respect of the

patriarchal society (Leighton 14). Unlike their male counterparts who seek more serious pursuits, women are considered as useful to the society mostly through their domestic duties. In this sense, Rossetti's fantastic works, both in poetry and prose, underline the tensions between "a discourse of resistance to female subordination and a discourse of conformity to conventional views of femininity" (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 303).

Regarded as "a peculiarly revolting book" by the *Times Literary Supplement*, Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) consists of three different stories that are woven together as one through a frame story. Inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and its sequence, *Through the Looking Glass*, in these stories, Rossetti aims at revealing the least attractive side of each of its child-characters through fantastic transformations. To this end, the characters, particularly in the first and the last stories, encounter their strangely disfigured doppelgangers who reflect the flaws and short-comings of their originals. Although at first glance the stories seem to re-affirm conventional gender roles, the frame story denies such a claim through the mockery of the Aunt; the story-teller. Rossetti, through the Aunt satirises the double standards that are at work for men and women in the Victorian society.

Being Rossetti's longest work for children, the stories in *Speaking Likenesses* are unified by the Aunt who tells stories to her nieces, while they sew handkerchiefs, repair socks and draw. The first story, as such, depicts Flora's birthday party and the fantastic dream she has during it. The second one describes Edith's futile efforts to boil a kettle in order to help the party that her parents are arranging and the third one centres upon Maggie's quest which is undertaken in order to deliver a package to a doctor's house on Christmas Eve. In *Speaking Likenesses*, particularly the first and the third tales are significant with their fantastic metamorphoses. Because the half-finished second story does not introduce any metamorphosis but simply underlies the attitude of the upper-middle class child who is oblivious to the materialist world around her, the second tale will be skipped for the purpose of this article.

The frame-tale starts with the narrator Aunt's summoning of her nieces into a domestic Victorian setting. The nieces, who are not allowed to sit down idly according to the dictates of the Victorian feminine conduct, are expected to sew and darn, while they listen to the stories of their aunt. The first tale begins with Flora's birthday celebrations that will be held in the company of her sister Susan, brother

Alfred and her cousins, as well as her friend Emily and Emily's friend Serena. Initially there is a lovely atmosphere among the children which is soon disrupted by the queenly manners of Flora and the complaints of the children who will not share their things. Because of this air of conflict, the delicious food they eat during lunch tastes sour and the children start showing their "ugly faces," while playing blind man's buff and hide-and-seek, as if the apple of discord were thrown into the air (Rossetti 121).

While everyone is sulking, and making faces to each other, Susan takes Anne and Flora to the woods as the boys, accompanied by Emily and Serena, follow them. On their way to the woods, not heeding the story Susan has been telling, gloomy Flora starts counting the yew trees around her. The trees are usually twenty in number, but to her surprise, Flora finds a twenty-first tree this time. Moreover, there is something unusual about the tree: It has a lamp growing on its highest branch, as well as a door, a bell and a knocker upon which "Ring also" is printed (Rossetti 125). Upon this, Flora reaches out and knocks on the door. Once inside, she finds herself in a lofty apartment which is furnished elaborately. There, she witnesses various transformations as the arm-chairs shift their shapes, sofas, footstools and tables run around from corner to corner freely and tea-trays, plates of cake, jugs of cream, saucers of strawberries come and go through a hole in a wall, behind which presumably lies the kitchen. The most disturbing thing about this chaos, yet, is the looking-glasses covering the walls up to the ceiling. At first, Flora finds these mirrors delightful and takes *"a long look at her little self full length"* (Rossetti 125).

However, soon Flora regrets the presence of the mirrors. At this point, the Aunt interrupts the story, as she has done several times before, warning the girls to go on with their work and not to get carried away by the story. Continuing with the story, she goes on describing the room which is filled with boys and girls who are having fun. While everyone takes care of him/herself, no one offers Flora a chair or something to eat or drink, which makes her quite uncomfortable. Suddenly a chair gently presses against her, forcing her to sit upon it, and once she does that, it takes Flora's shape. Flora feels very uncomfortable with all the eyes staring at her, yet none acknowledging her existence. When she finally finds the courage to eat a strawberry without waiting for any invitation, she feels even more nervous as a voice yells out to her saying that Flora is not allowed to eat it, because everything belongs to the owner of the voice. The voice belongs to a girl who is seated upon a

very high armchair wearing a coronet upon her head. Identified as the Birthday Queen, she repeats *"You shan't, they're mine [..] it's my birthday, and everything is mine."* As a result, Flora refrains from touching anything else, despite the tantalizing effect of the food on her (Rossetti 127).

Looking more frightening with her appearance multiplying in the mirrors, the Birthday Queen then arranges the shape of the room into a flat space. Children are gathered together in the middle of the room waiting for a game to be played. However, on a second look Flora discovers something strange about the appearances of these boys and girls. Because a boy, named Quills, is bristled with prickly quills like a porcupine; another one, called Angles, has sharp face angles and a third one, named Hooks, has hooks all around him; as for the girls, a girl named Sticky releases a sticky fluid, whereas another skinny girl, who is called Slime, slips through the fingers. Quite taken aback by their looks, Flora is approached by Hooks who asks her to tell him a game to play. In return, Flora suggests a game named *Les Graces* causing much dispute among the children. Interrupting their discussion, the Birthday Queen declares that Hunt the Pincushion is going to be played.

Hunt the Pincushion is a game based on the weaknesses and strengths of the characters, in which the stronger figures grasping the weakest player stick small pins to him/her. Not surprisingly, Flora is chosen as the weakest player and suffers its consequences at the hands of her cruel attackers. The game ends as Flora falls on the floor and the players hunt each other. The next game is Self Help in which no help is tolerated. Everybody has to take care of him/herself. This game, which makes the girls suffer, comes to an end, as the Queen yawns and declares that the game is over. As soon as this happens, immediately a supper table is set within the room. Flora's expectations, as she waits for permission to eat her fill, is turned down once again as the Queen takes no heed of her. When everyone, except Flora, is over with his/her supper, the Queen leads the company outside and the children start building houses with brick-shaped pieces of glass of different colours and fancy shapes; each child building them around him/herself.

To Flora's dismay, she recognises that she is being built in with the Birthday Queen. Once every child finishes his/her home, the children begin comparing their houses. Inside their glass houses, the children gain different shapes and colours. When they start making comments on each other's looks, a quarrel breaks out, as a subsequence of which the children begin throwing bricks at one another. The

winner of this chaotic entertainment is again the Birthday Queen. The Queen begins throwing bricks at Flora, while Flora tries desperately to run away and suddenly finds herself facing a familiar sight; her home. There, George reveals to her that he has found her sleeping under the yew trees yet has not disturbed her. Glad that everything was a dream, Flora asks for forgiveness from her company and enjoys her birthday party without causing any more problems. Followed by a didactic message given by the Aunt, Flora's story, thus, comes to an end.

Considered as "a pale shadow of *Alice*" at the time, there are some undeniable similarities between Carroll's and Rossetti's works (McGillis 227). The works both share the dreamy atmosphere of a grotesque world, which is occupied with fantastic creatures and animated objects, the rendering of desire and the fear of unknown. What Rossetti adds to this atmosphere is holding up a mirror to Flora's ugly double, her id-like inner self, which is so full of herself. Taking into consideration that fairy tales are *"experienced by their hearers and readers, not as realistic, but as symbolic poetry"* (Lüthi 66), their aim is *"to produce a whole, integrated human being"* whose inner journey is successfully completed (Le Guin 10). The journey includes *"processes within the mind; processes of development and maturation"* (Lüthi139). In the end, these processes lead the reader to a complete self-realisation and spiritual perfection. That's why the mirrors which do not strike Flora as disturbing at first, irritate her in the end, when she is trapped with her double in the glass-house. In this sense, the *"mirrors multiply only too precisely what the child does not want to see"* (Briggs 217).

Thus, Rossetti uses the mirror as a self-reflective device of one's own anomalies and id. The mirror, when faced, arouses desire, and raises questions related to self-importance. Rossetti employs the dream and mirror imagery as popular devices. As Briggs notes, mirror imagery has always been a part of Rossetti's poetry but traditionally as a moral-reflective device for self-examination (216). In this regard, Rossetti's unconventionalism rests on her use of a *"mirror-world fantasy"* (Clark 5). Recalling Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror phase, according to Armitt, *"the mirror is repeatedly found as a double-sided symbol which, as well as having its conventional, mimetic properties, likewise functions as a metaphorical gateway facilitating entry into another world, realm or stage of development"* (46). Jackson suggests that through its presentation of images of the self in another setting, *"the mirror provides versions of self transformed into another"*

(87). Because of the later encounter that occurs between the self and the mirror-self, following the division of the two, the ego-split is consequently healed.

To do so, Rossetti presents Flora's speaking likeness as the birthday Queen. Repeating Flora's previous claims – "It's my birthday" – the birthday Queen cries out *"it's my birthday, and everything is mine"* (Rossetti 121, 127). The Queen is an embodiment of Flora's selfish and spiteful nature. Briggs notes that *"the birthday Queen appropriates everything in sight, and Flora herself is displaced from the centre to the periphery, no longer ruler but her persecuted victim, pursued and tormented by prickly or slimy playmates, and excluded from their feast"* (222) In the even more nightmarish aftermath, Flora's entrapment within the glass-house with the Queen connects the two characters with each other. In the birthday Queen, Flora sees her least attractive side. In the mirror-world, where the rules of the primary world are deferred, she transforms from the controller to the victim, from subject to object. Forced to occupy the periphery herself, Flora is able to see the incidents from the eyes of the *other* now. As a result, when she wakes up, she is much more tolerant towards the other kids she had previously pushed to the periphery through her caprice.

The other characters occupying the mirror-world are also striking in their unusual looks. They are reflections of Flora's original party companions with their constant arguments and vicious acts, yet with one major difference; their physical distortion is directly associated with their sexes:

> Flora, elbowed and jostled in their midst, noticed points of appearance that quite surprised her. Was it themselves, or was it their clothes? [. . .] One boy bristled with prickly quills like a porcupine, and raised or depressed them at pleasure; but he usually kept them pointed outwards. Another instead of being rounded like most people facetted at very sharp angles. A third caught in everything he came near, for he was hung round with hooks like fishhooks. One girl exuded a sticky fluid and came off on the fingers; another, rather smaller, was slimy and slipped through the ends (Rossetti 129).

The description of the children recalls Bakhtinian grotesque which relies fundamentally upon hyperbole and excessiveness (303). In this regard, *Speaking Likenesses* employs the *grotesque "in its emphasis on carnality, orality and appetite. Mikhail Bakhtin's attention to representations of distorted, outsized or undersized, deformed or obscene human figures is also pertinent to [..] obviously 'grotesque'*

depictions of bodies" in Rossetti's work (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 292). As is highlighted by Arthur Hughes' illustrations for the stories, in *Speaking Likenesses "bottom becomes top, as the Fool becomes King; outside becomes inside, and ordinary conceptions of physical borders and boundaries are upset".* Burlinson further states that the lower bodily stratum replaces the upper topography in order to convey the interchangability of the regulations of materiality, sexuality, obscenity and physicality (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 292-293).

Bakhtin initially relates the disruption of the bodily hierarchy with the mouth. For him, the *"word is localized in the mouth and in the head (thought); from there it is transferred to the abdomen and is pushed out under the [...] head. Here once more we have the logic of the opposites, the contact of the upper and the lower level. We have also an exaggeration"* (Bakhtin 309). The symbolic replacement of bodily organs is particularly apparent while the children play Hunt the Pincushion:

> The Pincushion was poor little Flora. How she strained and ducked and swerved to this side or that, in the vain effort to escape her tormentors! Quills with every quill erect tilted against her, and needed not a pin: but Angles whose corners almost cut her, Hooks who caught and slit her frock, slime who slid against and passed her, Sticky who rubbed off on her neck and plump bare arms, the scowling Queen, and the whole laughing scolding pushing troop, all wielded longest sharpest pins, and all by turns overtook her (Rossetti 131).

Defying categories, regulations of the society and body politics, grotesque also reminds one of Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject, which disrupts issues of identity, system and order (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 293). Abject does not respect limits and laws. It is the in-between state which occupies the territory of the ambiguous. Through Rossetti's use of metamorphosis, images of the grotesque and the abject are represented. The distorted images of the mirror-world accordingly subvert the norms. As a result, the bodily topographies of Flora's birthday companions change in accordance with their sexes and their gendered sexualities are exposed with specific emphasis put upon their lower bodily stratum.

Representing a topsy-turvy world in this sense, the gender-based qualities attributed to the boys and the girls are quite significant. The openly *"sexual nature of the monster children in Flora's dream – the prickly little boys (erect Quills, sharp Angles and Hooks), and the slithery girls (Sticky and Slime) – has attracted disproportionate attention"* from the critical world (Briggs 213). Especially with

regard to the function of the games they play, they expose the *"outrageousness of the normal as it represents in a different context [..] gender-specific practice"* (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 299). Reminiscent of the goblins' harassment of Lizzie in *Goblin Market*, the games the children play likewise recall the nightmarish atmosphere of the *Alice* books. However, contrary to the sexual innocence of the *Alice* books, in Rossetti's story the games that are played reveal *"a deep fear of sexual violence and a disturbing disrespect for humanity. The first game treats human beings as objects, things without feeling or dignity"* (McGillis 227). The games both expose the male children as hideous miniature oppressors, whose physical shapes aid them in the subordination of the others. The girls are repellent too, though in their case it is not as a result of external shows of aggressiveness but simply on account of their sexuality: *"Their disturbing, oozing bodies bring the insides to the outside,"* in a grotesque manner (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 299). In a way, the disfigurement of the girls highlights their social victimisation and subordination based upon their overtly sexual nature. The Aunt suggests that the rules of Hunt the Pincushion are

> simple and demands only a moderate amount of skill. Select the smallest and weakest player (if possible let her be fat: a hump is best of all), chase her round and round the room, overtaking her at short intervals, and sticking pins into her here or there as it happens: repeat, till you choose to catch and swing her; which concludes the game. Short cuts, yells, and sudden leaps give spirit to the hunt (Rossetti 131).

Likewise, the second game is also based on victimisation this time through natural selection encouraging the idea of survival of the fittest, which reflects a society that is governed by self-interest only:

> Men and classes were no longer integral parts of a Christian-feudal organism where everyone had his recognized place and function and was united to Church and State by established rights and duties. In the new liberal theory all men were free, politically and economically, owing no one any service beyond the fufillment of legal constructs; and society was simply a collection of individuals, each motivated – naturally and rightly – by self-interest (Houghton 77).

Self-Help is important not only because of its physical oppression but also because of its association with one of the most influential works of the Victorian period. Through this game, Samuel Smiles' identically-named work *Self-Help* (1859) is severely criticised. It is made visible during the game that *"each boy depended on his own resources"* so that the *"boys were players, and the girls were played (if I may be allowed such a phrase): all except the Queen who, being Queen, looked on, and merely administered a slap or box on the ear now and then to someone coming handy"* (Rossetti 131-132). Meanwhile Hooks attaches a number of captives to his hooks and Angles, as an ironer, is engaged in a conventionally female labour which he uses as a way to maim the girls. Finally, the girls' bodies are written on by Quills, indicating both the power of ideological inscriptions and the possibility of resistance to them (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 298). Quills' act also confirms the supremacy of masculine authorship and like all the other games played evidently victimises the girls. In Self-Help, then, *"men help themselves to the less powerful and use them as they wish to"* making *"an explicit analogy between sexual and social victimisation of the female"* (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 297).

Rossetti, criticising the tension between the sexes, illustrates how these policies doubly victimise women in a world governed by men who are also after their own self-interest. Through the games played then, Rossetti criticises Victorian interest in social Darwinism which necessitates that the fittest survives at the expense of the weakest; that is men at the expense of women, and upholds the moral codes of religion instead by recommending that everyone should collaborate equally for a harmonious society. Although Flora's story seems to replicate traditional norms of femininity and masculinity by transforming the initial children in Flora's tale into characters whose bodily topographies openly reflect their sexuality, by restricting the children's aggressive and competitive existence to a dream-world which is identified as reflective of their least likeable aspects, Rossetti criticises the encouragement of particularly female victimisation in the socio-economic world and liberates Flora from such a dreadful future by finally waking her to the truth of the matter.

Thus, through the apple of discord symbolism in the actual world and the mirror-imagery in the dream world, Rossetti satirises Flora's vanity –which adds to women's subordination by reducing women to superficial beings who are only after trivial pursuits in life– and masculine aggression in general. Flora's story follows the

typical fairy-tale structure in which the female child learns a lesson from her dream-world experiences, yet strikingly manages to do so without the help of a masculine mentor teaching her of better feminine conduct. The apple of discord symbolism, in this sense, reveals both feminine vanity and a criticism of the imposition of gender-specific positions in life. Through her reference to the tale of Aphrodite, Athena, Hera and Paris which ultimately led to the Trojan War, the Aunt ironically reflects upon gender relations pointing to the injustice in the educational system (Bettelheim 212): *"What apple, Aunt? – The Apple of Discord, Clara, which is a famous apple your brothers would know all about, and you may ask them some day"* (Rossetti 121). Clearly, the brothers get the classical education that their sisters are deprived of. Due to the fact that the Aunt's authority is constantly undermined by the nieces throughout the stories, it can be said that in a way her comment on the educational difference between the sexes overtly criticises the injustices of the educational system in which unlike their sisters -who can hear stories only on condition that they carry out some household tasks- the brothers are unquestionably provided with classical education.

The Aunt derives her inspiration for her third tale again from her nieces. Jane and Maude suggest that all the stories that have been told so far have been summer stories, so they ask for a winter tale for a change. Starting the tale with a fake complaint on her modest talents that leaves her "little time for invention," the Aunt begins her winter tale by introducing old Dame Margaret, who runs the village fancy shop, into a Christmas setting (Rossetti 243). In fact, the Aunt marks this shop as *the* shop from which Edith's and Flora's gifts and dolls have come. Then, she describes the old lady as a nice, simple and generous lady who helps everyone in need and has an orphan grand-daughter, Maggie. Maggie is also a good child who helps her grandmother with the shop. One day, while they are working, they recognise that the doctor's wife has forgotten her parcel behind. Upon this, Maggie volunteers to take them to the family *"through the outskirts of an oak forest"* (Rossetti 144). Her grandmother is reluctant, yet she sends Maggie upon her insistence with strict instructions to make haste.

Though the weather is very cold and it is getting dark, Maggie with her basket under her arm quite determinedly leads the way. At first, she runs into a group of children playing Hunt the Pincushion and Self Help in a green glade. Once seeing them, Maggie wants to play with them so as to get warm but eventually she does not succumb to temptation, as she remembers her promise to her

grandmother and sets back on her journey. In a short while, she comes across a pair of wood-pigeons which cannot find anything to eat. Taking pity on them, Maggie is about to give them a little bit of the doctor's chocolate, when she suddenly hears footsteps behind and a very strange boy appears in front of her. This "poor starving beggar" accompanied with a fat cat is a grotesque figure with no apparent eyes, but a gigantic mouth (Rossetti 147). When he asks for food, Maggie tries to avoid looking at him and denies him the doctor's goods. Despite the boy's insistence and his clear attempts to get hold of the food, Maggie gives him none. Although the boy claims the opposite, his fat body reveals that in truth he is well taken care of. Since she proves very resolute, the boy leaves. Hungry and tired, gradually drowsiness comes over Maggie but she resists it. While struggling with sleep, she comes upon a dozen people sleeping around a gypsy fire which makes it harder for her to ignore her own drowsiness. However, remembering her promise to make haste once again, she takes her leave. At last, when she arrives at the doctor's house expecting a warm welcome, she is disappointed with the indifferent "thank you" she gets instead (Rossetti 149).

On her way back home, she sees no sign of the sleepers where they used to be but a half-dead wood-pigeon whom she brings back to life and takes away with her. Next, at the exact place she has met the mouth-boy, she finds a kitten which she also places in her basket. Finally, she sees a puppy where the children used to play and takes it away with her. Close to home, she also witnesses an Aurora Borealis. She returns to her granny's house where she eventually finds warmth, food and comfort. With this portrait of family reunion, the Aunt ends her stories.

According to Briggs, in providing a winter story to offset these two summer stories, Rossetti indulges in

> an almost Marxist contemplation of the means of distribution and consumption: the final story begins in the toy shop that has supplied the dolls, playthings, and sweetmeats so unreflectively enjoyed by Flora and Edith. The orphan Maggie works here; her nickname is that of Rossetti's older sister Maria, but also suggests a lower class than those of the other girls named so far. This is the first time, of course, that we have seen a child other than at play: Maggie helps her grandmother in the shop, fetching toys for children luckier than herself (225).

While her grandmother's shop underlines the presence of working-class women in market economics, orphan Maggie herself represents the working-class child who lacks most of the opportunities her luckier peers have. Flora hopes for *"birthday presents without any doubt of receiving some"* and is indeed given a doll which *"must have cost pounds and pounds"* and Edith dresses her doll "in its best clothes" (Rossetti 118, 120, 137). In contrast, Maggie owns neither the animals nor the dolls each of the girls have. Through this comparison, the triadic structure of *Speaking Likenesses* is reduced to a binary opposition. Illustrating how well the middle-class children are taken care of, while the working-class children are deprived of it, Rossetti clearly depicts the contrast between Disraeli's two nations; the haves and the have nots. Flora and Edith are both *"surrounded by loving parents and siblings, nurses, pets, toys, good food, comfortable homes with gardens and private woods at hand; they occupy the kind of middle-class paradise that is felt to be every child's birthright"* (Briggs 217). Thus, at every stage Flora and Edith's situations are contrasted with Maggie's, who is also the only one without parents.

Undertaking a quest on a cold Christmas Eve, Maggie reminds one both of Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Match Girl," and Charles Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood." The forest symbolism and winter setting are significant in their revelation of the difficulties Maggie has to overcome so as to deserve her rewards. According to Bettelheim, the forest stands for a test where "inner darkness is confronted and worked through" (93) as a result of which the person *"favored by fortune, [..] privileged by nature and deprived by a parent"* wins in the end (Tatar 58). Through Maggie, Rossetti subverts the traditional representations of fairy-tale heroines who commit the sin of vanity (like Flora), curiosity, greed or envy. Not associated with any of these qualities which are generally attributed to women by the patriarchy, Maggie heroically overcomes the temptations that she comes across during quest. In order to be rewarded, Maggie has to overcome several temptations. Interestingly her tempters are the same deformed children from the previous tale. Maggie encounters grasshopper children first, who tempt her to play with them. They are soon followed by another grotesque figure; the mouth-boy:

> A boy: and close at heels marched a tabby cat, carrying in her mouth a tabby kitten. Or was it a real boy? He had indeed arms, legs, a head, like ordinary people: but his face exhibited only one feature, and that was a wide mouth. He had no eyes; so how he came to know that Maggie and a basket were standing in his way I cannot say: but he did seem somehow aware of the fact; for the

> mouth, which could doubtless eat as well as speak, grinned, whined, and accosted her: "Give a morsel to a poor starving beggar." (Rossetti 147).

According to Bakhtin, *"the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else"* (317). Drawing upon Arthur Hughes' illustrations accompanying Rossetti's work, Burlinson argues that the mouth-boy's hyperbolic mouth is *"an image of the vagina dentata, surrounded by a mop of thick hair. The cat (or pussy) that accompanies the boy carries its kitten in its mouth, thus linking top and bottom body as the kitten that originally came out of one end is now seen emerging from the other"* (*All Mouth and Trousers...* 294). Bakhtin suggests that the mouth stands next to the bowels and the genital organs which cause defecation or pregnancy (317). Moreover, the cat's *"position between the legs of the boy corroborates this sexual and reproductive aspect, while the boy's bloated lower stomach suggest pregnancy as much as simple obesity"* (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 294-295). As a descendant of the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood," the mouth-boy's oral description marks him as more threatening than the conventionally dangerous animal as a hideous abject (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 295-296).

Orality is a serious issue in fairy tales, associated with the Original Sin and several others to follow such as gluttony, greed and envy, as well as bringing to mind the fear of getting eaten. Slusser, placing the oral impulse amongst the most primitive impulses, suggests that *"access to food is access to strength; and those who dare to violate the taboo, time and again, grow strong"* (9, 12). However, where women are concerned, this is not the case. Because curiosity and disobedience, which are seen as masculine virtues, are considered as dangerous when it comes to women (Tatar 111). The mouth-boy encourages Maggie to violate the taboo. Claiming that "the metaphor of devouring often stands in for sex" in myth and fairy tale, Warner confirms that the boy's appearance carries sexual overtones as well (259). In their association with the Original Sin, women are also denied reaching out to the imaginative capacities of the mind. Besides, marked by Slusser as a social issue, orality symbolically points to social Darwinism, as emblematic of "eating your way to the top" and "men eating fellow men," which is again considered as a masculine virtue rather than a feminine one (14, 16). Yet, by righteously working for her rewards, Maggie rejects being a part of the competitive masculine market and fairly earns them.

Another recurrent pattern is the animal sets present in each story. The animals that generally reappear in each story are a dog, a cat and a bird. These animals are associated with the child's spiritual, physical and social needs. Once again, Maggie's pets are different from that of Flora and Edith's. Flora and Edith already own these animals with specific names given to their pets indicating their ownership of them. Maggie's animals are associated with the prize that comes after manual labour. While *"Edith and Flora can take their pets for granted, Maggie must rescue from the dark and the cold the animals that embody her own needs"* and in that they also represent her unconscious wants (Briggs 218). Hoping that the doctor's family will invite her in, but denied such a chance, Maggie does not disappoint the animals she meets on her way. Though she has very little to offer to them, she picks them up, at exactly the same points where she met the three temptations on her way.

In this sense, the animals each correspond to the child's need for a specific thing. Respectively the dove stands for *"spiritual sustenance, the kitten to her need for food and physical nurture, and the puppy to her need for companionship and play"* (Briggs 217-218). Maggie cares for herself by caring for them because the wounded dove, the hungry kitten and the playful puppy, represent her own needs of warmth, food and company. They also repeat the triadic structure of the three temptations Maggie comes across during her quest, that is, to play, to eat and to fall asleep. Moreover, Maggie's observation of the natural wonder of Aurora Borealis at the end of her quest is a compensation for her previous losses. Rossetti, criticising her own discomfort with the materialisation of a religious festivity which becomes an opportunity to indulge children with greed by loading them with presents, makes up for Maggie's lack with her witnessing of a natural wonder (Briggs 226). In the form of the Aurora Borealis, Maggie experiences a spiritual illumination.

In this respect, Maggie embodies the plight of the working-class child who is morally ideal, though materially deprived. Rossetti, through Maggie, criticises the middle-class child, who is encouraged to play *"in the walled rose garden and protected from any knowledge of the poverty and deprivation beyond"* (Briggs 212). Unlike the middle-class child, Maggie has to overcome several temptations on her way each of which correspond to one of the cardinal sins, such as greed, envy, gluttony and sloth. Contrary to Flora and Edith, Maggie shows a strong stamina in overcoming these. Nonetheless, Rossetti's satire is not hidden behind the veil of

fantasy all the time. Rossetti's visible partner in crime is the Aunt who openly criticises the actions of her heroines as well as the deeds of her own nieces. By way of her sermons, the nieces are made aware of their much better position in life compared to the orphaned children who live on the streets or child-workers, such as chimney-sweepers, coal-miners or factory-workers.

Representative of Victorian virtues and moralities, the Aunt forces her nieces to work in order to help the financially deprived, while setting them down to tell them a story: *"Very well Maude, as you like: only no help no story. I have too many poor friends ever to get through my work. However, as I see thimbles coming out, I conclude you choose story and labour"* (Rossetti 136). Through this, she brings into question what her nieces, like Flora and Edith, have taken for granted. With her constant emphasis put on work, the Aunt repeats the common discourse of the Victorian society that considers man as "created to work," and that *"idleness was a moral and social sin"* (Houghton 189). The Aunt sets an example: *"Now I start my knitting and my story together"* (Rossetti 127). The Aunt's commitment to hard work, therefore, represents Victorian tendency to promote moral behaviour: *"Jane and Laura, don't quite forget the pocket-handkerchiefs you sat down to hem. See how hard Ella works at her fern leaves, and what pains she is taking to paint them nicely. Yes, Maude, that darn will do: now your task is ended, but if I were you I would help Clara with hers"* (Rossetti 125). Burlinson affirms that *"[t]his emphasis on labour as well as listening yokes the tradition of oral story-telling (always an activity pursued simultaneously with work) with a specifically Victorian textual context in which such bourgeois feminine labour is perceived as frustrating or tedious"* (*All Mouth and Trousers...* 301).

In the Victorian Period sewing circles that are organised to help the poor were quite a popular phenomenon: *"Victorian ladies regularly participated in [these], where someone read aloud or told stories to the rest as they worked at hemming and plain sewing clothes and sheets for the poor"* (Briggs 228). Rossetti mocks these sessions through the Aunt. Ironically, she both teaches her nieces the proper feminine conduct that requires physical restraint and industry, while at the same time betraying *"her own hatred of and contempt for conventional Victorian femininity on a number of occasions"* (Burlinson, *All Mouth and Trousers...* 302). Rossetti often reveals her contempt for her character especially in terms of the Aunt's "outstanding" authorial abilities. Rossetti's ironic tone makes fun of the Aunt's

superficial attitudes when she interrogates her nieces about the "mysterious whispering" that has been going on:

> "Well then, Jane and Maude, what is it?"
>
> "We were only saying that both your stories are summer stories, and we want you to tell us a winter story some day. That's all, Aunty dear."
>
> "Very well, Maudy dear; but don't say 'only,' as if I were finding fault with you. If Jane and you wish for a winter story, my next shall freeze hard. What! now? You really do allow me very little time for invention!"
>
> "And please, Aunt, be wonderful."
>
> "Well, Laura, I will try to be wonderful; but I cannot promise first-rate wonders on such extremely short notice [..]" (Rossetti 243).

The Aunt lowers the expectations of the nieces, as well as the readers, claiming a humble role for herself. Nevertheless, soon she reveals her self-confidence in the brilliancy of her stories. Upon her nieces' question whether the monstrous children occupying Maggie's story are the ones in Flora's dream, the Aunt replies: *"Yes, Ella, you really can't expect me not to utilize such a brilliant idea twice"* (Rossetti 146). However, Rossetti's treatment of the Aunt is rather mocking. According to McGillis: *"True, the narrator's 'didactic stance permeates the book', but the children who are* her *audience manage to undercut her didacticism"* (225). The nieces continuously interrupt the Aunt's narration. They comment on the oddness of a name or situation continually asking for clarification, or pointing out to the improbability of a statement. The Aunt, then, is more of a satirical device than a hailer of didacticism or morality. According to Burlinson, *Speaking Likenesses* in various ways reveals Rossetti's reflexive concern with storytellers and their power (*Christina Rossetti* 11). Recalling Laura's authorship at the end of the *Goblin Market, Speaking Likenesses* reflects problems of female sexuality and textuality. Although the Aunt is a visible embodiment of feminine literary imagination, she ironically does not find it a serious pursuit for her nieces. Burlinson considers the Aunt's disinclination to tell a tale she clearly knows at the suggestion of her nieces as a typical gesture (*All Mouth and Trousers...* 302):

> "Aunt, do tell us the story of the frog who couldn't boil the kettle."
>
> "But I was not there to hear Susan tell the story."

> "Oh, but you know it, Aunt."
>
> "No, indeed I do not. I can imagine reasons why a frog would not and should not boil a kettle, but I have never heard any such stated."
>
> "Oh, but try. You know, Aunt, you are always telling *us* to try."
>
> "Fairly put, Jane, and I will try, on condition that you all help me with my sewing." (Rossetti 136).

Thus, the nieces' irritating questions are actually invaluable in transforming them into active participants rather than passive recipients. The nieces, who are supposed to listen to the stories passively with no questions asked, continuously subvert the authority and the authorship of the Aunt. Moreover, in challenging the authority of the Aunt and directing her creative talents according to their wishes, they actually collaborate with the Aunt and turn into creative artists themselves. In this light, as Sircar suggests, it is possible to consider the Aunt as Rossetti herself; *"her own 'speaking likeness,' that is her own least attractive aspect or else as the traditional 'mentoria' of children's fiction who might draw moral lessons from all occasions, preside over a framework of inset tales, and prefer rationalism above fairy tales"* (qtd. in Briggs 227). With her rigid character's reluctant acceptance of the validity of the, seemingly, innocent naivety of her nieces' statements and questions, the Aunt's position as a moral-police is challenged, and in the end, she is reduced to a ridiculous role. Drawn in a ludicrous light, by the end she is forced to acknowledge the absurdity of her forced authority which victimises her nieces the way she has been victimised by the patriarchal society itself. Confined to the domestic sphere, the Aunt escapes reality with her attempts at authorial power. The foreseeable future, however, holds that the nieces would actively pursue beyond the limits set before them.

To conclude, by employing the fantastic and reclaiming the fairy-tale genre for women, in *Speaking Likenesses* Rossetti satirises the double standards of the society in terms of their expectations regarding "proper" masculine and feminine conduct. By way of her employment of the fantastic metamorphoses, Christina Rossetti liberates women from their sexual as well as socio-economic victimisation in the market economics of the Victorian society. The ending of *Speaking Likenesses* seems to confirm conservative views of femininity and the role of women within the society on the surface. Yet, acknowledging the possibility of freedom by letting imagination run free, supported by the future generations' challenging attitude

implies a subversion that refutes the morals of the didactic Aunt and the society's designated roles for women. For, Rossetti's stories, contrary to the claims of the Aunt, do not aim to preach but, instead, by not victimising the protagonists and giving them a voice rather aim at letting them experience life in all its aspects on their own.

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