

## REMEMBERING HARRIET READ: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "GOOD NURSE"

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The servants who worked in the household of a Victorian writer tend to be mentioned briefly, if at all, in the telling of the writer's life. One exception is the woman who served as Christina Rossetti's nurse-servant: Harriet Read. Her name appears often in the many newspaper accounts of Rossetti's death. *The Evening Telegraph & Star*, for example, makes a point of stressing that "only the nurse Mrs. Harriet Read ... was with her when she breathed her last" ("Death" 3). In *The Guardian*, Read's name appears among the list of the "chief mourners" at the funeral ("Burial" 5). William Michael Rossetti most likely provided Mrs. Read's name to the press. In both his diary and his later reminiscences, he describes Harriet Read as an attentive and caring nurse.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Rossetti biographers refer to Harriet Read in positive terms. For Dorothy Stuart, she is the "devoted nurse" (161). For Lona Mosk Packer, she is the "faithful nurse" (406). For Georgina Battiscombe, she is an "efficient and kindly woman" (204), and for Jan Marsh, she is again "the faithful" Harriet Read (406). Yet, this servant remains a shadowy figure. We know only that when Harriet arrives at 30 Torrington Square, Christina describes her as being of "full middle age, strong and sturdy looking" (*Letters* 4:268). When was Harriet born? Who were her parents? Who were her former employers before she became Rossetti's faithful servant? After Rossetti's death, did she continue to find work, and if so, how long did she remain in service? Answering such questions allows us to imagine this faithful servant more fully, and in so doing, we gain a fuller understanding of the role she played in the life of Christina Rossetti.

As one might expect, researching the life of a Victorian servant has its challenges. Fortunately, existing church and government records offer just enough information to provide glimpses of Harriet's early life. Her parents, Robert Read and Charlotte Aggas, married in London in June of 1835 at St. George's, in the borough of Camden. Robert was then 35 years old and Charlotte 25. Both had been born in Norfolk, and appear to have been from