

RECOVERING FEMALE COMMUNITY: FRANCES, MARIA, AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Mary Arseneau

Reconstructing the female community of the Rossetti family is challenging, not least because of the gendered patterns that were established during the Rossettis' lifetimes and were perpetuated in the biographical record. The Rossetti women eschewed autobiography; they destroyed much of their correspondence and personal papers, and they referred to each other in their published writings only covertly. We may conclude that much has been lost. We must also surmise that much was never written down in the first place. Even more significant, perhaps, than the lost letters and the public reticence is the irretrievable spoken word: Frances, Maria, and Christina Rossetti shared a home for all but a few years of their lives, and almost all of what the mother and sisters shared in this domestic setting is unrecorded. With her mother and sister, and often with the Polidori women as well (Frances's unmarried sisters Charlotte, Margaret, and Eliza), Christina shared a domestic setting about which William Michael Rossetti, our main source of biographical information, says virtually nothing. Yet this domestic setting is the site of the most significant community for Christina. Her deepest affections and her highest religious ideals were shared here; here too was an intellectual and literary community of well-read, active, informed, and religiously committed women whose importance to Rossetti's writing has not yet been fully accounted for.

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Any attempt to reconstruct the unwritten history of the Rossetti women must take into account the centrality of their involvement in the Tractarian and Anglo-Catholic movements. From the earliest date of their involvement, at least by 1843, the theology and aesthetics of the movement were a riveting interest and a transforming influence. Christina Rossetti's Tractarian influences and affinities have been recognized by scholars including G.B. Tennyson (174-204)