

REMEMBERING CAYLEY:  
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "DEAREST FRIEND"

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Christina Rossetti's brother William Michael describes Charles Bagot Cayley as the man she loved "deeply and permanently" but refused to marry for religious reasons: "On his declaring himself she must no doubt have probed his faith, and found it either strictly wrong or woefully defective" (*Poetical Works* liii). Subsequent biographers have tended to follow this narrative, telling of a woman who renounced earthly love for the sake of her religion. For example, Mary Sanders sees Rossetti's refusal to become Cayley's wife as a giving up of what might have been "her life's happiness" (141). Kathleen Jones suggests that Rossetti probably "regretted her decision" not to marry Cayley (142). Telling of Cayley's niece and nephew paying a call upon Rossetti, Stanley Weintraub describes Mary and Henry Cayley as "a suggestion of what might have been," thus implying they were viewed by the aging Rossetti as the children she might have had if she had married their uncle (263). Repeatedly, in the story of the Rossetti-Cayley relationship, the emphasis is on a marriage that did not happen. Yet, shortly after Cayley died in December of 1883, Rossetti referred to him as her "dearest Friend" (*Letters* 3:169). Clearly, her rejecting his offer of marriage in 1866 did not end their relationship.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I wish to shift from focusing on a marriage that did not occur to focusing on a friendship that did. By setting aside the romance narrative, we are better able to discern in Rossetti's poetry and prose the narrative she created: a narrative of "tender friendship," telling of two people united by kind remembrances, not divided by religious differences. Indeed, despite such differences, Rossetti found in the narratives of her faith a way to extend such a friendship beyond time into eternity.

When Rossetti biographers address the subject of Cayley's religious beliefs, typically they describe him as an agnostic. For example, Jones writes that Rossetti "could not contemplate marriage to an agnostic" (140). However, this assumption of Cayley's agnosticism seems based only upon William's 1904-memoir, yet William clearly states that all he knew for certain was that