

LOUISA JANE PARKE:  
THE GOVERNESS WHO WAS “SO GREAT A FRIEND”  
OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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On 15 January 1891, Christina Rossetti signed her last will and testament. The two witnesses were her solicitor, Sharon Grote Turner, and Louisa Jane Parke. Biographers of the Rossetti family occasionally mention Louisa Parke. We know that she worked as a governess and that at times the Rossetti family tried to help her find a suitable situation (Marsh 344). We know Dante Rossetti sketched a portrait of her in 1855 (Surtees 1:181). We know that on 4 January 1866 she and William Michael Rossetti participated in a séance (*Rossetti Papers* 166). Yet, Louisa Jane Parke remains a shadowy figure in the margins of the Pre-Raphaelite narrative. Indeed, at times, she has been either incorrectly identified or misleadingly described.<sup>1</sup> This essay is intended to begin the process of bringing this Victorian governess into the Rossetti story, especially in terms of her relationship with Christina Rossetti, with whom she formed a lasting friendship, ending only with Rossetti’s death in 1894.

The friendship that formed between Christina and Louisa had its beginnings in a friendship between Christina’s father – Gabriele Rossetti – and the historian Thomas Keightley, perhaps best known now for his *Fairy Mythology*. Being an admirer of Gabriele’s scholarship on Dante, Keightley made his acquaintance soon after Gabriele had immigrated to England in 1824. Born in Dublin, Keightley had also come to England in that year (Boase 173). This connection between the two families was further strengthened by a close friendship formed between Keightley’s nephew Alfred Chaworth Lyster and William Michael Rossetti, when in the beginning of 1848 Alfred, having left Ireland to join his uncle in London, began working at the Inland Revenue Office, where William had been working since 1845. Many years later, in 1887, when Alfred retired, William noted in his diary how much he would miss seeing on a regular basis this “very old, attached, and well-loved friend” (10 May 1887). After the death of her parents, Louisa had become a member of the Lyster household in Ireland, and at some point she was sent to