

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI,
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, AND *VERSES*

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Aided by the larger ‘turn to religion’ in literary studies, Rossetti criticism has increasingly recognized the integral relation between the poet’s faith and work. The momentum to recover or produce substantial readings of Rossetti’s religious art has also generated a renewed interest in the poet’s last publication, the 1893 *Verses*.¹ On the whole, however, *Verses* remains insufficiently considered, its relation to the poet’s Anglo-Catholicism under-explored despite its obviously religious nature. As a self-styled reprint of poems from earlier prose devotional works, *Verses* modestly points away from itself, but as G.B. Tennyson’s ground-breaking study of Tractarian poetry has taught us and as studies of other aspects of Rossetti’s work have fruitfully revealed, such reserve ought to invite our closest attention. In this article, therefore, I bring the conceptual work of *Verses* into conversation with nineteenth-century ritualist Anglo-Catholicism in order to reveal Rossetti’s final poetic publication as much more than the reprint it purports to be – indeed, to interpret it as an independently conceived work in which Rossetti re-imagines a dimension of her beloved faith that has failed to meet her – and, paradoxically, her church’s – expectations.

While Rossetti certainly found Anglo-Catholicism spiritually satisfying, she also witnessed a growing gap between the ritualist esteem for the doctrine of the communion of saints – that is, for the concept of believers as one in Christ, sharing in spiritual fellowship with God and other believers – and the ritualist practice of categorizing believers by rank and gender.² Though Rossetti accepted the principle of women’s limited public religious role, she could not have been comfortable with the increasing degree of lay and female exclusion from the liturgical practices of her local church over the course of ritualism’s advance. Indeed, the very presence of theological conversations about the nature of spiritual fellowship threw into relief the actual practices of