

“THE DIN OF CONTROVERSY”:
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI, PRISCILLA LYDIA SELLON,
AND THE SISTERHOOD DEBATE IN *MAUDE*

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Christina Rossetti's contributions to the *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* have rarely attracted the attention of scholars. The *Dictionary's* complicated publishing history is in itself somewhat of a barrier, and although the sheer bulk of the entries is important in confirming Rossetti's ambition and productivity at this early stage of her career, most of the *Dictionary* essays, aside from a major essay on Petrarch and a few other Italian figures, have not proven particularly noteworthy.¹ Careful examination of later volumes of the *Dictionary*, however, reveals that Rossetti published many more entries than has been previously assumed, and yields at least one important discovery: Rossetti's entry for "Sellon, Priscilla Lydia, mother superior."² Priscilla Lydia Sellon was the founder, in 1848, of the Church of England Sisterhood of Mercy of Devonport and Plymouth, one of the first of the Anglican sisterhoods that began to appear in the mid-nineteenth century. Although Rossetti's interest in religious sisterhoods is well documented, the Sellon essay constitutes her only known published commentary on contemporary Anglican sisterhoods, and it is of particular interest because it demonstrates Rossetti's familiarity with and response to Sellon, an extremely controversial figure.

The Anglican sisterhood movement, as Antony Harrison explains, presented a "disturbing challenge to dominant patriarchal ideologies, including that of the woman's sphere" (*Victorian Poets* 139). Although the extent to which the sisterhoods actually did constitute such a challenge is open to debate (Gill 208-09), by endorsing Sellon's leadership, Rossetti allied herself with the movement's most radical sector (see Mumm; Gill; Shelton). Sellon and her organization (usually referred to by its location as the "Devonport Sisters") were the focus of some of the most virulent attacks that the women's monastic