

ATTEMPTING “SPHERAL CHANGE”:  
D.G. ROSSETTI, VICTORIAN MASCULINITY,  
AND THE FAILURE OF PASSION

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*Your work ... [is] full of beauties, – best where most impassioned, as all poetry is & must be.*

– D.G. Rossetti, letter to William Allingham, 10 May 1861

In the years following the death of Dante Gabriel Rossetti on Easter evening 1882, his brother, William Michael Rossetti, found himself at war. At stake was the very “soul” of his brother, for this was a struggle to determine what image of Dante Rossetti would endure in the minds of subsequent generations. The sensational gossip which had haunted his eccentric brother during life was now systematically being codified as biography and literary history by family friends and by a popular press anxious to cash in on Rossetti’s death. In an 1887 review of Joseph Knight’s biography of Rossetti (entitled “A Cheap Edition of a Great Man”), Oscar Wilde would bemoan the tendency of popular accounts to “vulgarize” Rossetti. Rossetti’s genuine “giant personality” and his “true” artistry were being belied, Wilde claimed, by the feeble stories of lesser men (49).

In response to the plethora of cheap editions which began with Hall Caine’s *Recollections of Rossetti* (1882) – a man acquainted with Rossetti only in the final, mentally tormented and health-plagued years of his life – and in response to the equally self-serving and historically distorting post-mortem accolades heaped upon Rossetti by adoring aesthetes, William Michael determined to publish a comprehensive body of primary materials which, in their totality, might refute the increasingly unrecognizable picture being painted of his brother. To these materials he would also add, via a memoir and various introductions, those further correctives he thought necessary. William’s efforts would eventually run to four volumes – *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His*