

W. M. Rossetti and the Editing of Christina Rossetti's
Religious Poetry

i

In 1892 Christina Rossetti was encouraged by her brother, William Michael Rossetti, to publish a volume of exclusively devotional poetry. She first alludes to this project in a letter to him on November 29, 1892: "Writing to Mr. McLure I mentioned the verse-vol. scheme, and referred to you."¹ Mr. McLure, then Secretary of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, evidently agreed with the proposal since she soon began work. In the Family Letters William Rossetti also indicates that he had recommended his sister create this new volume by bringing together poems she had already included in prose works published by the SPCK in London. She accordingly drew upon the poems in three earlier publications: Called to be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied (1883), Time Flies: A Reading Diary (1885), and The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse (1892).² Her brother also notes: "This was done, in the volume entitled Verses, 1893" (Family Letters, p. 190). Early in 1893 she was hard at work on the 'scheme' because on February 8 she refers to her "slavish copying of the verses for the SPCK" By March 10 she was busy on the "printers' copy," but it was "not yet completed" (Family Letters, p. 193). Verses was eventually published late in 1893 in time for the Christmas book buyers.³ The volume sold well and, before the spring of 1894, passed into its third edition.⁴ A 12th thousand of Verses appeared in 1895, yet another edition in 1898, and it continued to be issued well into the present century, though in gradually diminishing quantities.⁵

The popular success of Christina Rossetti's Verses with readers at the turn of the century is in marked contrast to the almost complete neglect with which editors and critics have ever since treated the volume. Few of them, if any at all, have ever inquired if this collection of more than 300 religious lyrics disposed in 8 sections is merely the product of what the poet casually referred to as 'slavish copying.' Certainly her editors have implicitly felt that Verses is a hasty compilation of poems bereft of any significant order and structure. In fact, the dominant editorial practice