

“NO SONG, BUT SAD DIRGES”:
WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI’S BIOGRAPHICAL
INTERPRETATION OF SHELLEY’S
“WHEN THE LAMP IS SHATTERED”

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In 1870, the London publishing firm of E. Moxon & Co. issued two different versions of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, both edited by William Michael Rossetti.¹ The first, released in January, was in two volumes, with Rossetti’s prefatory “Memoir of Shelley,” which provided an overview of the poet’s life and attempted to place the major poems in their biographical contexts. Simultaneously, Moxon was also preparing to launch a second, less expensive one-volume edition, as part of their “Moxon’s Standard Poets” series, for release in July 1870. Rossetti wrote to Richard Garnett, on 16 January 1870, outlining the basic difference between the two editions:

The very day THE Shelley was out I received the proof of the little notice I wrote of him for the cheap series to be published in July. I SUPPOSE by the bye that that cheap book (costing I believe 3/6 or less) will reproduce the guinea text verbatim, with the sole omission of my own Notes etc.: so that Shelleyites who care for the revisions and dont [sic] want to pay a guinea will soon be accommodated. (Garnett 34)

In fact, the “cheap” one-volume version not only eliminated the Notes of the two-volume edition, but also replaced the original 150-page “Memoir of Shelley” (1:xxix-clxxix) with a brief fourteen-page “Prefatory Notice” (xi-xxiv).

Curiously, given the emphasis on abridgement in the one-volume edition, Rossetti’s radically curtailed “little notice” contained the following passage, regarding the failure of Shelley’s marriage to Harriet Westbrook, which did not appear in his original “Memoir”:

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