

GRAVE GIRLS:
ANARCHIC WOMEN IN HELEN AND OLIVIA ROSSETTI'S
A GIRL AMONG THE ANARCHISTS AND G.K.
CHESTERTON'S *THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY*

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*Society must be saved, but before everything the Sabbath must not be broken.
C'est délicieux!.... The English Sunday had saved our comrade!*
– Helen and Olivia Rossetti, *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (174-75)

In Helen and Olivia Rossetti's *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (1903, under the *nom de plume* Isabel Meredith), an anarchist escapes the detection of police detectives when they refuse to break the Sabbath to obtain a search warrant. Five years later, G.K. Chesterton will use the figure of the English Sunday as a metaphor for "the peace of God" in his own political farce about anarchists in England, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). Chesterton's novel reveals a carefully displaced anxiety over women's political subjectivity through the examination of an anarchist group and the women who lurk in the background behind them. Although Chesterton's text has languished in critical obscurity of late, I wish to argue that this work, which is still in print and remains his best-read work next to the *Father Brown* detective stories, buries within its own reactionary political weight another fascinating, if forgotten, novel by female authors: *A Girl Among the Anarchists*.

Co-written by Helen and Olivia Rossetti, the daughters of William Michael Rossetti and nieces of the poets Dante and Christina, *A Girl Among the Anarchists* is a novel about one young woman's coming of age through political radicalism. Although a work of fiction, the novel has strongly autobiographical elements, something William Michael Rossetti confirms in a letter to Algernon Swinburne: "Did you ever see or hear anything of a book published last summer – *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, by Isabel Meredith? It is a joint performance of Olivia and Helen, and recounts (with some disguises