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From *Hedda Gabler* to *Votes for Women*: Elizabeth Robins's Early Feminist Critique of Ibsen

Penny Farfan

In Elizabeth Robins's preview of the Coronation Suffrage Pageant of 1911—the largest and most spectacular demonstration of the British suffrage campaign—she announced that the Actresses' Franchise League contingent would be “led by Hedda Gabler, in the accomplished person of the Princess Bariatinsky on horseback.”¹ The actresses' choice of a leader was at once fitting and incongruous. On the one hand, Hedda Gabler signified an anger that the actresses' professional reliance on popularity with audiences prohibited them from expressing more directly and assertively;² and Hedda's anger, together with her brilliance and desperation, had immediately established her as one of the great roles for women in the dramatic repertory. On the other hand, Hedda hardly qualified to marshal feminist followers toward their goal of emancipation, since she lacks the courage and conviction of the many suffragists who endured such hardships as jail sentences and forced feedings. She does, after all, opt to commit suicide rather than to confront in a more constructive manner the circumstances of her life that she finds so intolerable. Still, mitigating this apparently incongruous aspect of the actresses' choice of Hedda as their leader was the fact that, though Ibsen included in his exposition the information that Hedda used to go riding in a long black skirt and with a feather in her hat prior to her marriage, she does not go riding within the time span of the play's action. Paradoxically, then, the recognizable figure whom the actresses were to rally behind was not the character that Ibsen depicted in his 1890 play but, rather, the character that they themselves imagined Hedda would have been had she somehow existed outside Ibsen's play.

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Unpublished writings by Elizabeth Robins are cited here by permission of Mabel Smith, the Backsettown Charity, and the Fales Library, New York University.

¹ Elizabeth Robins, “Come and See,” *Way Stations* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), 267. The Princess Bariatinsky, also known as Madame Lydia Yavorska, performed *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House* in London between 1909 and 1911. According to Miriam Franc, she was “the most successful of the foreign interpreters of Ibsen,” her “strange, fierce type of acting [making] her a theatrical sensation” (*Ibsen in England* [Boston: Four Seas, 1919], 97–98).

² Claire Hirshfield discusses the reluctance of actresses to identify themselves too closely with the militant suffragists in her article “The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1908–1914,” *Theatre Research International* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 129–53.

This revisionist Hedda of the Coronation Suffrage Pageant encapsulates the challenges that faced early feminist theatre artists such as Elizabeth Robins as they attempted to create dramatic roles that were interesting theatrically yet acceptable within emerging feminist terms. Robins, who lived to the age of ninety, identified her performance of the title role in the English-language premiere of *Hedda Gabler* in London in 1891 as the defining moment of her long and varied career as an actress, writer, and suffragist. By her own account, this “epoch-making event,” which catapulted her to fame as a daring theatrical innovator, caused her “to think of [her] early life as divisible in two parts ‘Before Hedda or after Hedda’”³ and “was to remain the active principle/force shaping existence for [her] as long as life would last . . .”⁴ Yet though Robins recognized Ibsen’s impact on her career and claimed that “no [other] dramatist [had] ever meant so much to the women of the stage,”⁵ she was not simply uncritically admiring of the “father” of modern drama whose notorious “women’s plays,” with their central female characters who defy prevailing standards of acceptable feminine behaviour, had made him the darling of the late-nineteenth-century women’s movement. On the contrary, Robins stated in her 1928 essay “Ibsen and the Actress,” “If we had been thinking politically, concerning ourselves with the emancipation of women, we would not have given the Ibsen plays the particular kind of wholehearted, enchanted devotion we did give” (“IA” 31). What Ibsen offered in the 1890s “had nothing to do with the New Woman; it had everything to do with our particular business—with the art of acting” (“IA” 32–33). Thus, Robins did not hail Ibsen as a champion of feminism, but distinguished between his contribution to the cause of actresses and his non-contribution, by her standards, to the cause of women’s emancipation. Her own 1907 suffrage play, *Votes for Women*, sought to redress Ibsen’s failings, but as a revisionary effort was itself problematic, for though it broadened the scope of theatrical realism by bringing to the stage the real-life drama and spectacle of the suffrage campaign, it was at the same time heavily implicated in the ideas and practices that, to Robins’s mind, had characterized the male-dominated commercial theatre prior to the advent of Ibsen and that had made his radical new drama so appealing to her in the first place. Robins’s theatre career, which became noteworthy with *Hedda Gabler* and ended with *Votes for Women*, therefore exemplifies the possibilities and limitations of early modern drama for feminist theatre artists at the turn of the century. This paper will chart Robins’s feminist critique of Ibsen as it developed over the course of her career and resulted in an unresolved tension not unlike that inherent in the figure of Hedda Gabler as suffragist icon.

Ibsen Actress

As an actress, Robins was interested in Ibsen for several reasons. At a time when the standard theatrical fare was melodrama, in which stock characters were straightforwardly differentiated as either good or bad, she was struck by the unprecedented realism of the characters peopling Ibsen’s plays. In “Ibsen and the Actress,” she describes the impact that Janet Achurch and Charles Charrington’s momentous

³ Elizabeth Robins, “Oscar Wilde: An Appreciation,” TS, Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University, 12.

⁴ Elizabeth Robins, *Whither and How*, MS, Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University, n.p.; hereafter cited in the text as *WH* unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Elizabeth Robins, “Ibsen and the Actress” (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), 55; hereafter cited in the text as “IA.”

production of *A Doll's House* had on her when she saw it in 1889, recalling the shock of seeing Achurch, costumed in the shabby but pretty "clothes of Ibsen's Nora," break the tacit rule of that period of theatre history "that an actress invariably comes on in new clothes, unless she is playing a beggar," and suggesting that "[t]he unstagey effect of the whole play . . . made it . . . less like a play than like a personal meeting—with people and issues that seized us and held us, and wouldn't let go" ("IA" 10–11). When, soon after, Robins had the chance to perform in Ibsen's drama herself, she found the complex and ambiguous character of Hedda Gabler incomparably exciting because she was so astonishingly "alive" ("IA" 31).

The new demands that Ibsen's drama made on performers also appealed to Robins, so that she told the London theatre critic and Ibsen opponent Clement Scott that she was "very grateful to a dramatist who gives us real work to do and does us the honour to presuppose a little intelligence and imagination on the part of the actor. Ibsen doesn't seem to find it necessary to put all his intention into words; he leaves a generous share to the artist to interpret in subtler ways."⁶ As Gay Gibson Cima has explained, Ibsen's method of retrospective action resulted in the emergence of "critical actors" who developed new methods of study and rehearsal in order to approach characters distinguished from those in melodrama by interpretive openness, subtextual depth, moral complexity, and gestural subtlety.⁷ Meeting these new interpretive demands even when playing a secondary and considerably less compelling role, such as Mrs. Linde in *A Doll's House*, enabled Robins to think of herself as Ibsen's partner in art and left her with a welcome feeling of "self-respect" ("IA" 15). "More than anybody who ever wrote for the stage," she claimed,

Ibsen could, and usually did, collaborate with his actors. . . . [T]o an extent I know in no other dramatist, he saw where he could leave some of his greatest effects to be made by the actor, and so left them. It was as if he knew that only so could he get his effects—that is, by standing aside and watching his spell work not only through the actor, but *by* the actor as fellow-creator.

["IA" 52–53]

After Robins encountered the "glorious actable stuff" of Ibsen's challenging characters ("IA" 31), the roles available to actresses in the commercial theatres where melodrama prevailed seemed to her like inconsequential and insipid "hack-work" in which she could not fully exercise her capacity for theatrical artistry ("IA" 33). As she wrote of her mainstream theatrical prospects upon completion of *Hedda Gabler*, "there were plenty of 'parts'—but what sort? Not such parts as we had in mind—pretty little parts however much they were called heroines, or 'leading parts'—Heaven save us leading nowhere."⁸

Robins was also exhilarated by the critical attention that she received for her groundbreaking work in Ibsen's dramas. Her pre-Ibsen press notices were as bland as the plays she had appeared in: a reviewer of her 1889 performance in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, for example, focused on her "sweet individuality, . . . refinement of manner, and . . . delicacy of style" and noted her "expression of chastened sorrow, . . .

⁶ Robins, *Whither and How* (Chapter 8), 10.

⁷ Gay Gibson Cima, "Discovering Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen," *Theatre Journal* 35, no. 1 (March 1983): 5–22; and *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 20–59.

⁸ Robins, *Whither and How* ("After Hedda: Offers"), n.p.

tenderness of manner . . . [and] fine sense of dignity,"⁹ while commentators on her performance in *Forget-Me-Not* that same year remarked in passing that she was "pleasing and tender," "tender and graceful," and "very sympathetic and charming."¹⁰ With *Hedda Gabler*, the quality and quantity of the critical attention that Robins attracted changed radically. Finally at centre stage in a performance variously described as "brilliant," "dazzling," "graphic and finished," the actress also found herself at the centre of a heated critical controversy over the merits of Ibsen, causing denouncers to temper their criticism of him with praise for her "misdirected talent."¹¹ Perhaps most notably, the anti-Ibsen critic Clement Scott conceded that Robins had

done what she no doubt fully intended to do. She has made vice attractive by her art. She has almost ennobled crime. She has stopped the shudder that so repulsive a creature should have inspired. She has glorified an unwomanly woman. She has made a heroine out of a sublimated sinner. She has fascinated us with a savage.¹²

After the genteel commentary that her work had inspired in the past, these reviews of *Hedda Gabler* were, in Robins's words, "a palpitating excitement." ". . . [W]hether we met abuse or praise," she stated in "Ibsen and the Actress," "in the end it was all grist to our mill. It was tonic to be attacked" ("IA" 18, 32).¹³

In order to have the opportunity to be a "fellow-creator" of art rather than a mere "hack" actress and to gain the full and serious attention of the critics, Robins had been obliged to undertake staging *Hedda Gabler* herself, in collaboration with her friend Marion Lea. Robins had realized as she struggled to break into the London theatre scene upon her arrival in that city in the late 1880s that, while being an American newcomer certainly exacerbated the difficulty of finding decent work with a reputable company,

[n]ot even actresses who by some fluke had proved their powers—had any choice as to what they should act. Not Ellen Terry herself, adorable and invaluable as she was, had any choice of parts, nor choice of how the parts chosen for her should be played. The only one who had a choice was the Actor-Manager or the Actress-Manager. . . .¹⁴

⁹ *Era*, 16 March 1889, quoted in Gay Gibson Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1978), 47.

¹⁰ *Stage*, 10 May 1889; *Sporting Life*, 11 May 1889; *Era*, 11 May 1889, quoted in Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress," 51.

¹¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*; *Daily Chronicle*; *Daily News*, quoted in Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress," 136, 135, 136.

¹² Clement Scott, *Illustrated London News*, 1891, in *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Egan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 227.

¹³ Robins's desire for the "tonic" of the critical spotlight may have motivated her 1893 production of the sensational *Alan's Wife*, which she and Florence Bell anonymously adapted from a story by the Swedish author Elin Ameen and in which a woman murders the deformed baby she gives birth to after her husband is killed in an industrial accident. Robins's reminiscences certainly focus more on the critical controversy that *Alan's Wife* generated than on its actual content (see Elizabeth Robins, *Theatre and Friendship* [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932], 117–18; hereafter cited in the text as *TF*), and her tendency in later explicitly feminist writings such as *Votes for Women* and "Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen" was towards the idealization of motherhood, suggesting that her representational standards shifted as her feminist politics evolved.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Robins, *Both Sides of the Curtain* (London: Heinemann, 1940), 250; hereafter cited in the text as *BS*.

Eager to determine both what roles she would play and how she would play them, Robins approached various London actor-managers about the possibility of producing *Hedda Gabler* in their West End theatres, with herself and Marion Lea in the roles of Hedda and Thea respectively. At the time, however, the lead role in most scripts was the one to be played by the actor-manager so that “[men] who wrote plays for women had long been seeing that they had little or no chance of being acted” (*WH* n.p.). Not surprisingly, then, Robins and Lea’s attempts to interest an actor-manager in *Hedda Gabler* were met with such forthright exclamations of amazement as:

“There’s no part for *me!*”

“But this is a woman’s play, and an uncommon bad one at that!”

“What can you *see . . . !*” and so on.

[“IA” 16]

Undaunted, the two actresses rented a theatre and produced the play themselves, using jewelry and a wedding present as collateral on a loan of £300.

This bold and unconventional move on Robins and Lea’s part intensified the controversy that *Hedda Gabler* generated of itself, for though they were not the first women to try their hands at management, their choice of play caused their initiative in assuming control of their careers to be seen by some to be as transgressive as Hedda’s abortive attempt to control a human destiny. One anonymous but presumably male critic concluded an indignant review by wondering why

actresses of the approved artistic intelligence and mental refinement of the Misses Robins and Marion Lea . . . should demean their quality by worshipping at the feet of such an earthy Dagon [as Ibsen]; and the marvel of his notorious influence over the feminine rather than the masculine mind becomes the greater when it is considered that his characterizations of womankind deny her the purest attributes of her nature, whether as maiden, wife, or mother.¹⁵

There was, to this reviewer’s mind, a tacit connection between art and life in Robins and Lea’s production of *Hedda Gabler*; in willfully producing and performing such a provocative piece of drama, the actresses had, he implied, gone as far beyond the pale of accepted standards of femininity as Ibsen’s title character herself.

This suggestion of a correspondence between the unorthodox circumstances of the production and the disturbing content of the play was indirectly substantiated by Robins in “Ibsen and the Actress” when she stated that she “did not see Hedda as she was described by any critic,” but as “a bundle of unused possibilities, educated to fear life; too much opportunity to develop her weakness; no opportunity at all to use her best powers” (“IA” 18–19). Electing to play this repressed, thwarted woman in a controversially sympathetic production for which she and her female collaborator were entirely responsible, Robins introduced the inner life or subjectivity of the actress into the formula of theatre production, communicating her dissatisfaction with characters constituted of “the purest attributes of [womankind’s] nature, whether as maiden, wife or mother,” but also inevitably calling attention to her own previously “unused possibilities” in the mainstream actor-manager-controlled theatre and making

¹⁵ “Goldsmith and Ibsen/A Dramatic Contrast,” *People*, 26 April 1891, in *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, 232–33.

apparent her rebellion against her consignment to the status of “human prop” in the “hierarchy of parts.”¹⁶

But if there were similarities between Robins and Hedda, whom Jane Marcus has romantically described as “the universal of the unawakened female artist,”¹⁷ there was also a great difference in that where Hedda’s creative potential remained untapped to the point of implosion, Robins’s did not. Producing and performing *Hedda Gabler* was an exhilarating and incredibly liberating experience that confirmed her sense that to be a leading lady in the commercial theatre was to be in “leading strings” (TF 149); that while men and women alike might suffer “[t]he strangulation of this rôle and that through arbitrary stage management” by actor-managers showcasing themselves at the expense of both the drama and the rest of the company,

freedom in the practice of our art, . . . the bare opportunity to practise it at all, depended, for the actress, on conditions humiliatingly different from those that confronted the actor. The stage career of an actress was inextricably involved with the fact that she was a woman and that those who were masters of the theatre were men. These considerations did not belong to art; they stultified art.

[TF 33–34]

Working on Ibsen’s drama, Robins tried to overcome these stultifying conditions and forge for herself an exciting and successful career. She played a total of six other Ibsen characters besides Hedda and Mrs. Linde: Martha Bernick in *The Pillars of Society*, Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Agnes in *Brand*, Asta in *Little Eyolf*, and Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*. She was, in addition, responsible for staging all of these productions except *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll’s House*, and the experience of having her own company and the “freedom of judgement and action” which that entailed left her with next to no taste for participating in mainstream theatrical enterprises (TF 33, 149).

When We Dead Awaken

At some point, however, the scope of Robins’s cultural critique expanded to include not just the commercial theatre but Ibsen’s drama as well, and though it is not possible to ascertain precisely when and why she began to “think politically” about the man whose work had meant so much to her as an actress, her horrified response to his final play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), is significant. In her memoir *Raymond and I*, Robins states that *When We Dead Awaken* “was matter almost for tears” and that, with it, “the Master hand had weakened, the Master voice was failing.”¹⁸ In a letter to her friend Florence Bell, she expressed her disappointment in even stronger terms:

The interest of 10 years is ended and as I think of the nightmare that the play really is, with its jumble of Hilda, Hedda, Borkman, Peer Gynt, etc.; it’s as tho’ in the loosening of that

¹⁶ Jiri Veltrusky, “Man and Object in the Theatre,” in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, trans. Paul L. Garvin (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1964), 86, 85.

¹⁷ Jane Marcus, “Nostalgia Is Not Enough: Why Elizabeth Hardwick Misreads Ibsen, Plath, and Woolf,” *Art and Anger: Reading Like A Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 58.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Robins, *Raymond and I*, quoted in Jane Connor Marcus, “Elizabeth Robins” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1973), 285.

mind from its moorings one kept seeing swept by on the flood marred pieces of mighty work done in days of vigor—wreckage on a giant scale.¹⁹

When We Dead Awaken clearly appalled Robins in a way that no Ibsen play had done before, though not simply by its aura of symbolism or by its technically problematic finale, which requires that the two main characters be buried under an avalanche: *Brand* also ends with an avalanche and works such as *The Master Builder*, *Rosmersholm* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, all of which Robins had staged, presage the combination of realism and symbolism that marks Ibsen's last play. Rather than in its style, its staging difficulties, or its purported lack of originality—an evaluation with which such notable contemporary readers as James Joyce and George Bernard Shaw did not concur²⁰—the explanation for Robins's intensely negative response to *When We Dead Awaken* should perhaps be sought in the play's content and the implications of this content in view of the actress's statement that she saw floating about in it "marred pieces of mighty work done in days of vigor."

When We Dead Awaken is, in Adrienne Rich's words, "about the use that the male artist and thinker—in the process of creating culture as we know it—has made of women, in his life and in his work; and about a woman's slow struggling awakening to the use to which her life has been put."²¹ This theme was not an entirely new one for Ibsen; as Michael Meyer observes, "the man who sacrifices the happiness of his wife or the woman he loves for the sake of a cause or a personal ambition" had already been seen in such plays as *Brand*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*.²² Moreover, the companion to this theme—the woman who seeks a male channel for her ambition and creativity—had come up with equal persistence in such works as *Hedda Gabler*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder*. Confronted with *When We Dead Awaken*, Robins may have suddenly become aware of this commonality among Ibsen's works, for though she later recalled how she used to be struck with "wonder at the absolute newness of the vintage" of every one of his characters and how each of his plays seemed "an absolutely fresh attack upon the raw stuff of existence,"²³ she also connected Ibsen's earlier plays not only to his last work but to each other when she lamented in her letter to Florence Bell that she saw them all "jumbled" up together in *When We Dead Awaken*.

In her significantly titled anonymous feminist tract *Ancilla's Share: An Indictment of Sex Antagonism* (1924),²⁴ Robins discusses how women's "inventiveness, . . . humour,

¹⁹ Elizabeth Robins to Florence Bell, 12 December 1899, quoted in Joanne E. Gates, "'Sometimes Suppressed and Sometimes Embroidered': The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Robins, 1862–1952" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1987), 211. Gates's dissertation has been revised and published as *Elizabeth Robins, 1862–1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1994).

²⁰ Michael Meyer, introduction, *When We Dead Awaken*, in Henrik Ibsen, *Plays: Four*, trans. Michael Meyer (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), 205.

²¹ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 34.

²² Michael Meyer, introduction, *John Gabriel Borkman*, in Ibsen, *Plays: Four*, 125.

²³ Elizabeth Robins, "Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen," TS, Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University, 21; hereafter cited in the text as "SA."

²⁴ Jane Marcus has argued that "[t]he title, *Ancilla's Share*, was in fact a naming of [Robins's] whole career (or several careers) as a woman artist" and that she went from playing Ancilla to Ibsen to playing Ancilla to the feminist movement ("Elizabeth Robins," 3).

... intellectual passion, ... vision [and] poetry" have traditionally been subsumed into the art of the men in their lives.²⁵ Her description in this tract of the generalized experience of becoming sensitized to the widespread existence of "sex antagonism" suggests how Ibsen's stark presentation of a male artist's devastation of his female model's life in *When We Dead Awaken* may have triggered in Robins a flash of recognition that caused her to perceive variations of the same theme everywhere in Ibsen's drama and to critically reevaluate his work as a consequence of her new insight. "Much as passages of doubtful propriety pass the juvenile reader unnoticed," Robins writes,

women of all ages seldom consciously register the judgments slighting or condemnatory meted out wholesale to her sex. Little short of amazement is in store for women who re-read their poets and historians with a view to collecting evidence of man's account of her character and of her place in the scheme of things. . . .

As from day to day [a woman] reads the papers, skims through current fiction, or turns the pages of biographer or poet, she will repeat a common experience: that of coming upon some word as she thinks for the first time, or upon some truth never in her own mind formulated before—and thereafter finding the new word, or newly apprehended fact, re-appear with a frequency, an insistence, that leaves her marvelling how it contrived so long to escape her.

[AS 49–50]

Ancilla's Share further suggests how the recurrence in the Ibsen canon of the idea that is played out so baldly in the relationship between the model Irene and the sculptor Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken* may have led Robins to believe that this idea must surely have been sanctioned by "the Master" himself, for as she states in criticizing H. G. Wells for his sexist attitudes,

To impute to a writer an opinion which he has put in the mouth of one of his characters is, of course, not defensible. But when a writer through a long series of books has consistently expressed through many mouths a certain idea, we know that idea has for him the validity and importance which alone could justify such emphasis, or indeed lend a writer such tireless patience in repetition.

[AS 83]

Though in *Ancilla's Share* Robins is critical of her associates Henry James and George Bernard Shaw as well as of H. G. Wells, she does not mention Ibsen, perhaps out of concern for the preservation of her anonymity or perhaps because her personal investment in his work was as great as that of Irene in Rubek's sculpture in *When We Dead Awaken*. In any case, Robins's disappointment with Ibsen's last play put an end to her decade of work staging his drama, and though she went on to perform in a couple of unmemorable commercial productions of plays by other authors, she had long before lost heart for "hack-work." She devoted herself increasingly to writing and gave up acting altogether in 1902, by her own account "without bitterness, without even the decency of sharp regret" (TF 212).²⁶

²⁵ Elizabeth Robins, *Ancilla's Share: An Indictment of Sex Antagonism* (London: Hutchinson, 1924), 104; hereafter cited in the text as AS.

²⁶ Robins's persistent autobiographical return to the theatre in such works as "Ibsen and the Actress" (1928), *Theatre and Friendship* (1932), and *Both Sides of the Curtain* (1940) suggests that she continued to identify herself primarily in terms of her experience as an actress long after her retirement from the stage.

“Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen”

Whatever the process by which Robins came to critical consciousness with regard to Ibsen, in 1908 she demonstrated a clear movement away from her earlier enthusiasm for his work when she presented a lecture entitled “Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen” at the Philosophical Institute in Edinburgh.²⁷ The “aspects” of Ibsen under consideration in this unpublished lecture are his philosophy and his poetry, and Robins’s main premise is that though the playwright has been regarded by some “as first and foremost a thinker,” he was, as he himself realized, more than anything else a poet (“SA” 1).²⁸ As such, she argues, he was unsurpassed, and if his plays have seemed at times to present “material towards a retrial of old conclusions it was chiefly because of the value of an independent witness of unflinching veracity who precisely had no doctrinal axe to grind” (“SA” 2). His desire as a dramatist was not to teach or to philosophize; rather, as he once remarked with reference to *Hedda Gabler*, he wanted “to depict human beings, human emotions, and human destinies upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions” of his day.²⁹ If he had not “left conclusions to shift for themselves, if he had not given us drama rather than moralizing,” then, to Robins’s mind, “we should be more disposed to quarrel with his limitations as a thinker” (“SA” 5).

But Robins is not *indisposed* to quarrel with Ibsen’s limitations in her lecture, and the first that she singles out for critical attention is what she sees as his glorification of the individual will, epitomized in his character Dr. Stockmann’s notion “that the strongest man is he who stands most alone.”³⁰ This theme of *An Enemy of the People* “makes a capital play,” Robins states, but it is obviously seriously flawed as “a philosophic dictum”:

A man should be sure enough of his faith to be *ready* to stand alone—but if he should continue to stand alone he proves the valuelessness of his faith except for one man out of

²⁷ “Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen” is Robins’s only fully developed critique of Ibsen. Addressing a presumably non-theatrical audience at the Edinburgh Philosophical Institute in the heat of the suffrage movement in 1908, she apparently felt obligated or at liberty to look at Ibsen from a theoretical perspective. Perhaps because of her feminist critique of the now established playwright, however, her talk was not well received, her diary entry for October 27, 1908 indicating that she had spoken before a “cold audience” (Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University; subsequent references to Robins’s diaries are from this same source).

In “Ibsen and the Actress,” Robins states that she would not have been as enthusiastic about Ibsen’s drama if she had been “thinking politically” about “the emancipation of women,” but she does not follow through with a feminist critique, probably because she originally presented the essay as part of a British Drama League lecture series in celebration of the centenary of Ibsen’s birth and intended it to compensate for the fact that preceding lectures in the series had made “no mention of the theatre or of acting” (Robins’s diary, 5 March 1928). In the introductory paragraphs of “Ibsen and the Actress,” therefore, she announces her intention to bring a specifically theatrical perspective to the centenary proceedings and to address “Ibsen’s significance to actors,” stating that “without the help of the stage the world would not have had an Ibsen to celebrate; and without Ibsen the world would not have the stage as it became after his plays were acted” (“IA” 7–8). Her diary entry on March 12, 1928 indicates that, unlike “Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen,” her talk on Ibsen and the actress was warmly received.

²⁸ In locating Ibsen’s merit in his poetry more than in his ideas, Robins agreed with her friend William Archer in his debate with George Bernard Shaw.

²⁹ Henrik Ibsen, quoted in Robins, “Some Aspects,” 4.

³⁰ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, quoted in Robins, “Some Aspects,” 5.

all the populations of the world. He is then 'strong' only for himself and for his fellows the weakest of weak reeds.

[“SA” 5]

In Robins's opinion, “Ibsen's bias towards individualism leads him into the pitfall of the incurable hero-worshiper, belief in the Superman, which is nothing but a revamped Romanticism returned to us in another guise” (“SA” 6).

This naive and retrograde belief of Ibsen's in turn has a negative effect on his dramaturgy, Robins maintains, for “he does not correct and rationalize his vision [of the powerful individual will] by relating it scientifically to other wills” (“SA” 7). In *Brand*, for example, the character Agnes submits to the wishes of her superman husband at the expense of their dying child. Robins acknowledges that there is “a strong dramatic idea in the situation of a mother in whom the wifely instinct is stronger than the maternal; who sees her duty to the child and yet sacrifices it to the husband.” She reminds us, however, that this idea was not Ibsen's concern in *Brand*. Rather, his concern was with “the complete dedication of life to the service of the highest” and for this reason Agnes's fatal decision “[outrages] reason and dramatic probability” (“SA” 7). Preoccupied with his title character, Ibsen failed to recognize that “not only the tender Agnes but any mother worthy of the name” would have taken her child away to recuperate and then rejoined her husband at a later time (“SA” 8). This solution, so much more credible to Robins than the one Ibsen actually scripted, would not necessarily have contravened his theme but “would have stopped his particular drama” (“SA” 8). Saving his play, Ibsen unwittingly arraigned “the woman's love for her child—which [he] thought he was presenting as without a flaw”—and thus in effect undermined his own theme (“SA” 8).

After taking issue with Ibsen's individualism and its problematic dramaturgical consequences, Robins goes on to dismiss the notion that his “profound understanding of women” earned him the “right to be considered as a thinker” (“SA” 8.) She concedes that his female characterizations evolved over time and states that, though in an early draft of *The Pretenders* Ingeborg defines “woman's saga” as being “to love, to sacrifice all and be forgotten,” Ibsen was too astute an observer to “look at life and fail to see that that is but one aspect of the matter” (“SA” 9), and he therefore revised the line to read as the individual character's saga rather than as that of all women. Moreover, Robins continues, Ibsen did more in his later plays “than any writer of the age to give the coup de grace to the old conception of a heroine as half angel and half idiot”; to familiarize the world “with the fact that woman's soul no less than her brother's is the battleground of good and evil” (“SA” 8–9); and “to disembarass women from the ignoble shackles of sentimentalism.”³¹ Regardless of these advances, however, Ibsen remained, in Robins's opinion, far “from realizing what is called the feminist point of view” (“SA2” 24). Of all his characters, only Nora in *A Doll's House* openly condemns and rejects the way she has been treated by her husband and the way women are treated in society at large; otherwise, Ibsen was “not so much profound in his judgements as vivid in his power of transferring materials for judgement to the mimic scene.” Indeed, he “often does not himself realize the far-

³¹ The third quotation is from a second TS version of “Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen,” Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University, 24; hereafter cited in the text as “SA2.”

reaching implications in [his] flashes of actuality, as in [*Brand*] where he sermonizes the mother for living according to a base standard which was not of her raising and which had been forced upon her as an unwilling bride" ("SA" 9).

Robins draws further examples from *Brand* to illustrate her sense of Ibsen's "failure or . . . indifference to arriving at the implicit conclusion" of his insights into the workings of women's minds ("SA" 9). In an early epic poem dealing with the same characters, Brand's mother slaps the face of her dead husband, whom she was forced to marry, and cries out that he has wasted her life. In revising this poem into dramatic form, Ibsen wrote what Robins found to be a "feeble" and "unrationalized" corresponding scene in which the mother no longer expresses righteous indignation, but instead demeans herself by rooting about the corpse in search of money that will compensate her for having sacrificed her life in a loveless marriage. Still more unfortunately, from Robins's point of view, Ibsen failed to realize in the course of his revisions that Brand's wife Agnes might have had the same sort of critical insight as the mother in the epic poem and might consequently have "[looked] back at the end and [said] with stinging scorn: 'Take my loathing for that you not only sacrificed our child's life to your pride of Will but you bound upon my back the burden of knowing that my criminal submission to you was in sort a murder of my child'" ("SA" 12). Thus, Robins seems to imply, though Ibsen had opportunity, through Agnes and through Brand's mother, to pronounce judgement on a society in which women were forced to marry men they did not love and to obey even the most unsanctionable demands of their husbands, in both instances he let the opportunity pass. Robins concludes, therefore, before extolling Ibsen's genius as "the supreme dramatic poet of the age," that if he has been heralded foremost as a thinker, it is not because of the soundness of his ideas but because his ideas are easier to translate from Norwegian than his poetry or because the critics have been so overcome "with surprise at [his] discovery of how poignant . . . the drama of ideas" can be that they have neglected to evaluate the soundness of these ideas in themselves ("SA" 12-13).

Robins's argument in "Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen" is somewhat convoluted, perhaps because of the difficulty of navigating between her celebrity and authority as one of Ibsen's main proponents in England on the one hand and her subsequent feminist critique of his work on the other. Nevertheless, it is possible to infer from the text of the lecture that feminism was associated in Robins's mind with women's recognition and transcendence of subordination, and that because Ibsen's Hedda, for example, does not articulate a feminist critique of her life circumstances or do anything constructive about them, Ibsen could not, according to Robins's taxonomy, be classified as a feminist. Robins, then, would not have agreed with Jane Marcus that "[t]he feminist critical consciousness has no need to remake Hedda into a suitable propagandistic model [because she] exists, as Ibsen created her, as a horrifying example of the personal and social consequences of neglecting to give women useful and interesting work of their own."³² On the contrary, Robins quite clearly came to feel a need to "remake Hedda into a suitable propagandistic model" and in her 1907 suffrage play, *Votes for Women*, had already attempted to do so.

³² Marcus, "Nostalgia," 58.

Votes for Women

Since 1906, the suffrage movement had increasingly been played out in the streets, parks, and public buildings of London, and this real-life drama must certainly have clarified for Robins the omissions of Ibsen's realism with respect to the representation of women and the limits his characters posed to the enactment of female subjectivity. Unlike Hedda Gabler, who was, in Robins's words, "a bundle of unused possibilities, educated to fear life" ("IA" 18), the women who bodied forth their desire for the vote by participating in mass suffrage demonstrations came from all walks of life and applied their abilities and talents in a range of different occupations. These women risked censure and harassment by demonstrating and speaking in public but in the courage of their convictions rose admirably to the occasion. Casting about for a topic for a play, Robins seized on these women, and over the course of her research was converted to their cause.³³

Robins had initially taken up writing to make money while looking for work as an actress during her early days in London, but, "loving The Stage ever the best," had regarded it then as a somewhat tedious "way out" rather than as "a way in, or a way up" (BS 231, 21). Her commitment to writing grew as she achieved increasing success as a novelist, but it was only with *Votes for Women*—the first work she had "written under the pressure of a strong moral conviction" and among her earliest active involvements in the suffrage campaign—that she found her niche as a writer.³⁴ By 1909, she was president of the newly formed Women Writers' Suffrage League, advocating "the use of the pen" to obtain the vote and "to correct the false ideas about women which many writers of the past have fostered."³⁵ The chief writer in Robins's own past was of course Ibsen, and *Votes for Women* was indeed intended as a revision of his drama, as the author herself wittily signalled in the novel version of the play, *The Convert* (1907), in which one character describes a suffragist character as "Hilda [Wangel of *The Master Builder*], harnessed to a purpose."³⁶

Classified by Robins as a "dramatic tract,"³⁷ *Votes for Women* concerns a woman named Vida Levering, who, prior to the action of the play, has been involved with the wealthy Geoffrey Stonor and become pregnant out of wedlock. Persuaded by Geoffrey to have an abortion in order to safeguard his patrimony, Vida has consequently lost her love for him and without explanation severed their relationship. Ten years later, at the start of the play, she is a beautiful, unmarried and somewhat mysterious suffragist,

³³ Gates, 315. In a 1907 essay entitled "The Feministe Movement in England," Robins describes how she was opposed to women's suffrage until she "first heard women talking politics in public" in Trafalgar Square. ". . . [On] that Sunday afternoon, in front of Nelson's Monument, a new chapter was begun for me in the lesson of faith in the capacities of women" (*Way Stations*, 40).

³⁴ Elizabeth Robins to Millicent Fawcett, 1 November 1906, Fawcett Library, quoted in Gates, 316. Gates discusses Robins's fiction at length, as does Angela John in *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life, 1862–1952* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³⁵ "Women Writers' Suffrage League," reprinted in Elizabeth Robins, *Way Stations* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913), 112; Elizabeth Robins, "For the Women Writers," in *Way Stations*, 116.

³⁶ Elizabeth Robins, *The Convert* (London: Women's Press, 1980), 253.

³⁷ Elizabeth Robins, quoted in Marcus, "Elizabeth Robins," 321 and Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 11.

and he is an important politician running for re-election and recently engaged to a pretty and politically naive young heiress. In Act I, the former lovers meet unexpectedly at a weekend house party but pretend not to know each other, while Geoffrey's fiancée Jean develops an interest in the hotly debated issue of women's suffrage and chances to learn the secret of Vida's past, though not the identity of her lover. As the act ends, Vida leaves for London and Jean persuades Geoffrey to take her to a suffrage rally at Trafalgar Square that she has heard about from Vida. Act II is set at the rally, where Vida turns out to be making her debut as a platform speaker. Deeply committed to eradicating "the helplessness of women," which she sees as "the greatest evil in the world,"³⁸ Vida details in an impassioned speech the suffering of a working girl who was sexually exploited by her married employer, became pregnant, killed her newborn baby, and was hanged for infanticide, while her master, whom she identified before the court as the father, was censured by the coroner but could not be held legally responsible and so went scot-free. Watching Geoffrey listen to this terrible story and to Vida's expression of sympathy for the desperate girl driven to act on a "half-crazed temptation" by the harrowing experience of childbirth, Jean realizes that he is the man in Vida's past and deserts him to offer her services to Vida and the suffrage cause (VW 72). All the principals converge at Jean's house in the final act, and Jean insists that Geoffrey make amends to Vida by offering to marry her. Vida refuses his reluctant proposal, having long ago dedicated her life to the common good rather than to her own personal happiness. Instead, using her influence over Jean as a weapon, Vida tries to force Geoffrey to pay his debt to her by lending his political support to the suffrage campaign. Though he notes that this attempt at coercion threatens to compromise his already intended endorsement by giving it "an air of bargain-driving for a personal end," Geoffrey is persuaded by Vida's selfless passion to commit himself to the cause of women's suffrage. In the play's conclusion, Vida confides that maternity is the true source of feminine happiness and that Geoffrey need not worry about Jean's interest in suffrage if she has a child because "from the beginning, it was not the strong arm—it was the weakest—the little, little arms that subdued the fiercest of us" (VW 86–87). She adds that though she herself will never be a mother, she will try to make the world a better place for all children by devoting herself to the suffrage cause more fully than women with children are free to do.

Votes for Women compensates for each of the failings outlined in "Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen." For example, where, in Robins's opinion, Ibsen occasionally subordinated dramatic probability to dramatic effect, she herself carefully develops her suffrage theme as the logical and perhaps inevitable outcome of her heroine's past circumstances. Unlike Ibsen's Agnes, who passively allows her child to die and then loses the will to live herself, Robins's no less remorseful Vida Levering survives her heartbreaking experiences of pregnancy and abortion and makes them the starting point of her service to the suffrage cause and of her determination to put an end to the helplessness of women. Moreover, where Ibsen allows only Nora of all his female characters to speak out against the injustices they have suffered as women, Robins provides Vida with the opportunity not only to pronounce judgement on men and on patriarchal society throughout *Votes for Women*, but also to demand—and get—

³⁸ Elizabeth Robins, *Votes for Women*, in *How the Vote was Won and Other Plays*, ed. Dale Spender and Carole Hayman (London: Methuen, 1985), 49; hereafter cited in the text as VW.

political compensation for women from Geoffrey Stonor in the final act.³⁹ Finally, where Ibsen appears to Robins to espouse a retrograde and problematically elitist philosophy of individualism, she herself promotes the grass-roots feminism of the suffrage movement, dramatically actualizing this contrast in the suffrage rally in Act II of *Votes for Women*, which differs significantly from the meeting in Act IV of *An Enemy of the People* at the same time that it recalls it.⁴⁰ Thus, where Ibsen's scene is constructed so that Dr. Stockmann predominates even when he is not speaking, Robins does not bring Vida Levering on stage until two-thirds of the way through the act, giving the floor first to several other speakers representative of the class, gender, and age diversity of the suffrage ranks. Further, where the self-proclaimed intellectual aristocrat Dr. Stockmann uses the meeting platform to express his dissent from "the plebs, the masses, the mob" that he sees as "nothing but raw material which may, some day, be refined into individuals,"⁴¹ Robins's genteel Vida Levering uses the rally platform to express solidarity with women of all classes and to argue the necessity of organization and cooperation.

Regardless of the revisionary achievement of *Votes for Women*⁴² and of the fact that it presented a central female character who exemplified "the feminist point of view," as Robins understood it, by recognizing women's subordination in patriarchal society and doing something constructive about it, certain aspects of Robins's characterization of Vida Levering must be seen as problematic in that they undermined the very reforms that Robins had worked so diligently to institute over the course of her career as an actress and producer. Her primary goal during her days on the stage was to play complex and challenging female roles and therefore, unlike the German actress who would not perform the final act of *A Doll's House* as written because she herself would never leave her children,⁴³ Robins did not feel any desire "to whitewash General Gabler's somewhat lurid daughter," "to try to make her what is conventionally known as 'sympathetic,'" or to otherwise "mitigate Hedda's corrosive qualities" ("IA" 20–21). On the contrary, far from being a deterrent to her as an actress, "[i]t was precisely the corrosive action of those qualities on a woman in Hedda's circumstances that made her the great acting opportunity she was . . ." in the first place (21). The fact that Hedda, like so many of Ibsen's other female characters, demanded intelligence and

³⁹ William Archer remarked on the rhetorical resemblance between *A Doll's House* and *Votes for Women*:

You remember how, in the last scene of "A Doll's House," the egregious Helmer says to Nora, "No man sacrifices his honour even for the one he loves," and Nora replies, "Millions of women have done that!"

Well, multiply this Helmerism and this Noraism by several hundred, and you have the dialogue of "Votes for Women!" And the trouble is that the Helmerisms are quite typical, and the Noraism [sic] exceedingly cogent and crushing. (Quoted in Marcus, "Elizabeth Robins," 321)

⁴⁰ Cima remarks on this resemblance between the meeting scene in *An Enemy of the People* and the suffrage rally scene in *Votes for Women* in "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress," 264.

⁴¹ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, in *Plays: Two*, trans. Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 1980), 195.

⁴² For a more exhaustive analysis of *Votes for Women* as a feminist response not simply to Ibsen's drama but to a broader range of male-authored nineteenth-century drama, including the "drawing-room plays of the 1890s" and "Drury Lane city spectacle," see Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own*, 9–39. Not focussing on the relation of *Votes for Women* to Robins's work as an actress, Stowell reads the play as more successful in its subversion of the patriarchal dramatic tradition than I do.

⁴³ Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1967), 480.

artistry of actresses rather than the usual good looks and charm⁴⁴ further enhanced her appeal. To Robins's mind, one of the most objectionable and humiliating conditions for women in the commercial theatre was the chronic emphasis on conventional feminine attractiveness, an emphasis Robins experienced even in her work on *The Master Builder* when, after a dress rehearsal, her friend Henry James pressured her to alter Hilda Wangel's characteristically utilitarian and negligent costume to something prettier, more agreeable, and more "in the right key" (TF 99–100). Coupled with the common practice of casting according to line or type, which Robins deplored as harmful to actresses (BS 252), this emphasis on appearance effectively cut short the theatrical careers of many talented women, among them possibly Robins herself, who retired from the stage when she was forty and later noted of the theatre that "[for] the middle-aged performer—the hold had to be a sentimental one or a family tie."⁴⁵

Robins's characterization of the heroine of *Votes for Women* directly contravened the theatrical reforms definitively advanced in her work on *Hedda Gabler*. Described in the stage directions as "an attractive, essentially feminine, and rather 'smart' woman of thirty-two, with a somewhat foreign grace; the kind of whom men and women alike say, 'What's her story? Why doesn't she marry?'" (VW 46), Vida Levering is ultimately a defensively crafted and melodramatically conventional victim who has, by her own admission, come to terms with her emotional conflict long before the action of the play and whose demands on the actress portraying her—beyond physical beauty—are consequently relatively simple: an occasionally superior knowingness tinged with remembered pain in Act I, genteel reticence gradually overcome by passionate commitment in Act II, and fiercely righteous indignation in Act III.

Cautioning against ahistorical feminist critiques of suffrage dramas such as *Votes for Women*, Sheila Stowell has argued that Robins, writing within a patriarchal dramatic tradition, was attempting with Vida Levering both "to reconstruct the woman with a past as a figure of absolute integrity, one who firmly believes in the life she lives," and to "counter prevailing stereotypes of suffrage supporters as 'unnatural' masculinized women poaching on male preserves."⁴⁶ Lisa Tickner, moreover, enables Robins's strategy to be situated within a broader representational context, noting that suffrage artists in various media commonly employed conventional images of femininity in order to "[invite] identification and [offer] reassurance, both to potential converts and

⁴⁴ Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress," 114.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Robins, quoted in Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress," 263. Cima herself explains that an actress

had only so many years on the stage, unless she achieved the stature of Bernhardt or Duse, in which case the audience would continue to pay to see her, even in her old age. Many London actor-managers, on the other hand, played youthful roles into their later years, without remonstrance from the audience. ("Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress," 49)

In *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), Tracy Davis writes:

The termination of an actress's career seemed to have more to do with her age than with her family life. Employment was markedly restricted to glamorous functions demanding young recruits. In other words, the development of a woman's career was largely decided by factors beyond her control and unresponsive to her talents or determination. (52)

⁴⁶ Stowell, 5–6, 18, 21.

to suffragists themselves."⁴⁷ Yet whatever the reasoning behind the suffragists' representational strategy, the problems inherent in it are evident in a review of *Votes for Women* published in the *London Times*. Having duly reported "Miss Levering's" assertion that men are wrong to assume that all women long to be married, the *Times* critic leadingly wonders why the character herself "[takes] such care to make the best of her good looks and pretty figure and wear such charming frocks? Is it to please other women?" Then, patronizingly exempting the central figure of Robins's play from the general contempt he feels for suffragists because she is atypical, the reviewer concludes that the suffrage cause would undoubtedly "make much more headway . . . if all its advocates were as fair to look upon, as agreeable to hear, and as beautifully dressed as [the lead actress of *Votes for Women*] Miss Wynne Matthison."⁴⁸ While this production review may arguably indicate that Robins's play achieved a certain measure of qualified success in its attempt to win support for women's suffrage, it also underlines the dramatist's implication, through her tactic of employing a "womanly woman" to score feminist points, in the very attitudes and practices that had been so oppressive and demeaning to her as a theatre artist. This implication is made even more apparent by the unfortunate resonance of the *Times* critic's language and tone with those of the quintessential actor-manager Henry Irving, whom Robins sardonically quoted in *Both Sides of the Curtain*, her autobiographical account of her struggle to break into London theatre, as having stated that "women have an easy road to travel on the stage. They have but to *appear* and their sweet feminine charm wins the battle" (241).

Rather than in its problematic usage of the image of the womanly suffragist or its compensatory dramaturgical approach, the more fundamental and effective way in which *Votes for Women* challenged male dominance was by virtue of its status as a dramatic tract. While Robins admired Ibsen for his poetry rather than for his philosophy, reviewers of the Court Theatre production pointed out that by classifying her own play as a "dramatic tract," she "[deprecated] merely aesthetic criticism" and that by "[sacrificing] that precious thing, her art" for the sake of a transitory cause, she "willfully [missed]" writing "a very fine play."⁴⁹ Indeed, Robins made no claims for *Votes for Women* as a work of art, incorporating into it long passages of undisguised propaganda that she may have transcribed from actual suffrage meetings⁵⁰ and employing the melodramatic techniques she had deplored as an actress to forward the plot and enlist sympathy for her suffragist heroine.

But in addition to conveying her position on the immediate issue of women's suffrage, Robins's artless though realistic dramaturgy communicated her much broader and less topical sense of the need to create—even at the temporary expense of art—conditions conducive to the development of women's potential, the possibility of

⁴⁷ Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907–14* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), 151.

⁴⁸ Review of *Votes for Women*, by Elizabeth Robins, as performed at the Court Theatre, London, *Times* 10 April 1907, 5.

⁴⁹ William Archer, quoted in Marcus, "Elizabeth Robins," 321; *The Daily Mail*, 10 April 1907, quoted in Marcus, "Elizabeth Robins," 312.

⁵⁰ Jane Marcus, "Transatlantic Sisterhood: Labor and Suffrage Links in the Letters of Elizabeth Robins and Emmeline Pankhurst," *Signs* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 750.

which is denied in Ibsen's plays where female characters repeatedly channel their energies through male characters. Thus, when a contemptuous heckler calls out during the suffrage rally in *Votes for Women* that there has never been a woman Beethoven, Plato, or Shakespeare, Vida Levering spoke for the largely sympathetic and predominantly female audience at the Court Theatre⁵¹ and for Robins as actress-qua-playwright, claiming the avant-garde stage for the purpose of feminist propaganda by replying:

Since when was human society held to exist for its handful of geniuses? How many Platos are there here in this crowd? . . . How many Shakespeares are there in England today? . . . I am not concerned that you should think we women can paint great pictures, or compose immortal music, or write good books. I am content that we should be classed with the common people—who keep the world going.

[VW 70–71]

Were that equal classing achieved, Robins was to claim years later in an argument that anticipated Virginia Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own*,⁵² a great step would have been taken toward creating an environment in which female genius might for once have a chance to flourish (AS 102). *Votes for Women* was a contribution to the creation of such an environment. Rejecting the patient and orderly but ineffectual proceedings of the Constitutionalist suffragists in favor of a more radical and spectacular activism,⁵³ Robins's play mediated constructively, through its pointedly political artlessness, between Hedda Gabler's furiously impulsive destruction of Eilert Loevborg's manuscript (Figure 1) and the acts of vandalism that were perpetrated by increasingly desperate militants in the final phase of the suffrage campaign and that included an attack on Velasquez's masterpiece, the *Rokeby Venus*, in the National Gallery in early 1914 (Figure 2).

This connection between Hedda's inarticulate rage at her inability to control her own destiny and the suffragists' indignation at not having their rights recognized was confirmed in the use of Hedda Gabler as the rallying figure for the Actresses' Franchise League in the Coronation Suffrage Pageant of 1911. In the process of reforming the

⁵¹ Claire Hirshfield, "Suffragettes Onstage: Women's Political Theatre in Edwardian England," *New England Theatre Journal* 2 (1991): 16; Marcus, "Elizabeth Robins," 318.

⁵² Woolf begins the "peroration" of *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1929) by reciting for her young female audience a list of what women have failed to achieve: "You have never made a discovery of any sort of importance. You have never shaken an empire or led an army into battle. The plays of Shakespeare are not by you, and you have never introduced a barbarous race to the blessings of civilization." She concludes by stating that a woman of Shakespeare's genius will only be born when less exceptional women have the opportunity to work to prepare the way for her (112–14).

Citing Woolf's argument that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births" but "the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (Woolf, 65), Jane Marcus has argued that Elizabeth Robins was one of Woolf's literary foremothers and that "[s]he and hundreds of other unknown women writers prepared the literary soil for the eventual creation of the woman of genius, the Shakespeare's sister" ("Art and Anger: Elizabeth Robins and Virginia Woolf," *Art and Anger*, 126).

⁵³ Referring to the militant suffragists' first disruption of a parliamentary proceeding, Vida Levering asks an unsympathetic gathering at the house party in Act I of *Votes for Women*,

Isn't it just possible they [the militants] realize they've waked up interest in the Woman Question so that it's advertised in every paper and discussed in every house from Land's End to John O'Groats? Don't you think *they* know there's been more said and written about it in these ten days since the scene than in the ten years before it? (57)



Figure 1. A studio portrait of Elizabeth Robins as Hedda Gabler, apparently destroying the manuscript. Courtesy of Mabel Smith, the Backsettown Charity, and the Fales Library, New York University. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 2. An anti-suffrage postcard. Courtesy of Rosemary Hards, private collection. Reprinted with permission.

original Ibsen character into a dashing, self-assured and righteously outraged feminist leader, however, the actresses had necessarily to suppress Hedda's more desperate and cowardly aspects and, in so sanitizing and idealizing her, they implicitly emptied her of the "corrosive" qualities that, in Robins's opinion, had made her such a wonderful acting opportunity to begin with, turning her instead into a character more along the lines of Robins's own Vida Levering. Thus, the ambivalent image of Hedda on horseback leading the beautifully attired actresses in the suffrage parade bodied forth the central tension of Robins's long and complex relationship with Ibsen by pointing both toward the limitations of even the most sophisticated male-authored characterizations of women and toward the continued attraction of early feminists in the theatre to these characters, even as they struggled, with mixed success, to develop new roles for themselves. In foregrounding this figure in spite of her ambivalence, the actresses, like Robins through her authorship of *Votes for Women*, claimed not only literal space on the political stage but also figurative space in the imaginative realm of art and drama.