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Elizabeth Robins

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## Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952)

Sowon Park (Oxford University)

Novelist; Theatre Actor/ Actress; Journalist; Playwright / Dramatist; Revolutionary, Activist.  
Active 1880-1952 in England; United States

Elizabeth Robins was an American who lived most of her adult life in England. She was one of the most widely-admired actresses of her age, and after a successful theatrical career became an influential feminist activist and writer.

Though she lived in England from 1889 until her death at the age of ninety in 1952, Robins had only intended to stop for a short stay *en route* home from a visit to Norway. It was the key turning-point in her life; and her beginnings suggest little to anticipate it. She was born during the American civil war in Louisville, Kentucky on the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1862 to Charles Ephraim Robins and Hannah Maria Crow. She was their first child although Charles had a son from a previous marriage. They went on to have six more children in the next decade. Triggered by post-natal depression, Hannah suffered deep mental instability and eventually entered an asylum in 1885. Robins and her siblings went to live in Zanesville, Ohio, with her paternal grandmother Jane Hussey Robins who appears in Elizabeth Robins' semi-autobiographical novel *The Open Question* (1898) and to whom the book is dedicated. Her grandmother was always her “touchstone” and had Robins' life-long love and respect. Robins was also particularly close to her brother Raymond whose wife was Margaret Dreiser, the President of the American Women's Trade Union League.

Against tremendous family opposition, Robins began her acting career in 1881 and was much in demand when she met George Richmond Parks, a fellow actor. They toured together with the Boston Museum Stock company and Robins, with reluctance, married him in 1883. Two years later, he drowned himself with a suit of theatrical armour tied to his waist. Robins took flight to Norway to seek refuge and it was from there that she arrived in England. Robins never remarried and for the last forty years her close companion was Dr Octavia Wilberforce.

Robins first found fame on the London stage in the title role of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler; and it was primarily with Ibsenite characters that she was associated around the turn of the century. She later claimed that “no dramatist has ever meant so much to the women of the stage as Henrik Ibsen” and certainly, that was true in her case. She performed as Martha Bernick in *The Pillars of Society* in 1889, as Mrs Linde to Marie Fraser's Nora in *A Doll's House* in 1891-2, as Hedda Gabler in the eponymous play in 1891-4, as Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder* (said to be her favourite Ibsen part) in 1893-4, as Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* in 1893 and as Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman* in 1896-7 and in these roles had a considerable impact on the growing spirit of the “New Woman” in late-Victorian England. She also established herself in the popular imagination as the high-priestess of Ibsenism. George Bernard Shaw, for example, wrote in *Our Theatre in the Nineties* that “Miss Robins was Hilda.” This conflation was something that Robins herself shared, to a degree. Years later when Virginia Woolf

invited her to a performance of *The Master Builder*, Robins declined with the explanation “I’m Hilda. I’m the person it was written for.”

Robins was not only a fine Ibsenite actress; she was pivotal in bringing Ibsen to the London stage – she co-translated and produced *The Master Builder* as well as producing *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Years later, the great actress Dame Sybil Thorndike told Robins “If it had not been for you, we might not have seen Ibsen – anyway not so soon.” To which Robins replied, “There is always someone to start a new chapter, and I am lucky to have taken part in that revolutionary chapter of the theatre.”

Indeed, Robins fought and reconstructed the actor-manager system of the late-Victorian theatrical world bringing about better rights for actors and founding the New Century Theatre (1897). But it was for her performances that she won the greatest acclaim: Mrs Patrick Campbell called her “England’s first great intellectual actress”; writer and diplomat Douglas Ainslie thought her “the only person to convey the quality of emotion peculiar to Ibsen – perhaps the kernel of his genius, of which others reach only the outside, with much trouble”; the journalist Henry Nevinson wrote that though he had seen all the great actresses of the last fifty years “none of them produced upon my mind and emotions such an overwhelming effect as Miss Robins.”

In 1897, at the age of thirty-five, Robins retired from the stage and began a highly successful second-career as a writer. She had already published her first novel *George Mandeville’s Husband* in 1894 under the pseudonym, C. E. Raimond; and in 1904, *The Magnetic North*, which was the first work published under her own name, became a bestseller. She then went on to publish fourteen novels, two volumes of short stories, two memoirs, two books on feminism, and countless articles, mostly for women’s rights. Her novels from the earliest had feminist themes and dealt with issues like divorce, abortion, prostitution, and suffrage. From 1906 she was an energetic supporter of women’s suffrage. As a committee member of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), she gave speeches around the country which were much admired. Writer Evelyn Sharp later wrote that she was converted after hearing Robins speak at a NUWSS conference. Robins also wrote prolifically to promote the cause and her hit-play, *Votes for Women*, became the basis for perhaps her best novel, *The Convert* (1907). Unlike other suffrage novels, memoirs and autobiographies which focus primarily on the process of the protagonist’s political awakening, *The Convert* offers an exceptional exploration of the complexities of political processes, as well as providing deft sketches of the movement. Penetrating analyses of sexual politics can also be found in *Ancilla’s Share* (1924) and pioneering feminist literary theory in *Way Stations* (1913) which prefigures Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. In addition to her WSPU allegiances, Robins was the first and the last president of the Women Writers Suffrage League (1908-1919). After the passing of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, Robins continued to be active in promoting the feminist cause: she was one of the first seven directors of the *Time and Tide*; one of the vice-presidents of the Six Point Group; a member of the Women’s International League; and on several boards of women’s hospitals, and in 1927, turned her fifteenth-century house into a women’s convalescent home which it remained until 1989. Robins died in 1952 after a life dedicated to the cause of women’s emancipation.

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