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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| Arthur Boatin<br><i>MOVEMENTS IN THE MIND: THE STORIES OF SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER</i>   | 1                 |
| Henry Claridge<br><i>A REALIST IN THE THEATER: THE CAREER OF JAMES A. HERNE</i>  | 18                |
| Joanne E. Gates<br><i>ELIZABETH ROBINS: FROM A DARK LANTERN TO THE CONVERT — A STUDY OF HER FICTIONAL STYLE AND FEMINIST VIEWPOINT</i> | 25                |
| Sandra L. Katz<br><i>DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS: THE WORLD OF SUSAN LENOX</i>   | 41                |
| William W. Kimbrel, Jr.<br><i>MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG: THE TRANSFORMATIONAL CHARACTER OF MYSTICAL POETRY</i>                            | 47                |
| Barry M. Maid<br><i>DINAH MULOCK AND JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN: AN INTRODUCTION</i>  | 58                |
| Bette B. Roberts<br><i>SOPHIA LEE'S THE RECESS (1785): THE AMBIVALENCE OF FEMALE GOTHICISM</i>   | 68                |
| Lucille P. Shores<br><i>ROSINA BULWER-LYTTON: STRONG-MINDED WOMAN</i>  | 83                |
| Stephen Sossaman<br><i>SEX, LOVE AND REASON IN THE NOVELS OF JOHN CLELAND</i>  | 93                |
| Janet Teng<br><i>A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO THE POETRY OF JAMES WRIGHT</i>   | 107               |
| NOTES ON THE AUTHORS   | Inside back cover |

William Gillette, and Bronson Howard, all of whom found it difficult to break away from Boucicault's model of social comedy.

Despite the excessive claims of its subtitle — as a playwright Herne was in no sense an equal of Ibsen and his "Ibsenism" is, properly speaking, a feature exclusive to *Margaret Fleming* and *Griffith Davenport* — Dr. Perry's book is scrupulously documented and richly detailed in its depiction of the theater of Herne's time; it is, in the broadest sense, a biography of Herne *in* his age. As such it helps us to fill out our picture of the development of realism in America through a medium about which we know much too little and which, too often, has been ignored by historians of the realist movement. Moreover, it makes Herne accessible to us and may well prepare the way for the republication of his works.<sup>5</sup>

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Perry, *James A. Herne: The American Ibsen* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978), pp. 151-2.
- <sup>2</sup> The point is not metaphorical. For a good deal of the nineteenth-century the popular stage was filled with melodramas in which well-trained canines performed a variety of prodigious feats. Herne's first acting role was as Seneschal in *The Dog of Montargis*, a play based on an older canine melodrama *The Butcher of Ghent and His Dog*.
- <sup>3</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, *A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day*, Rev. ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1936), p. 135.
- <sup>4</sup> Perry, p. 96.
- <sup>5</sup> Of the plays only *Margaret Fleming* is easily available. It is contained in Arthur Hobson Quinn's edition *Representative American Plays from 1767 to the Present Day*, 7th ed. Rev. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953.) Herne's important essay "Art For Truth's Sake in the Drama" which first appeared in *The Arena* in 1897 is collected in Alan S. Downer's *American Drama and its Critics: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 1-9.

## ELIZABETH ROBINS: FROM A DARK LANTERN TO THE CONVERT A STUDY OF HER FICTIONAL STYLE AND FEMINIST VIEWPOINT

Joanne E. Gates

Elizabeth Robins' early feminist novel *The Convert* is forgotten today largely because the context of her life and achievements are unknown. When the novel appeared in 1907, at the time of escalation of the women's suffrage campaign in England, Robins was a literary personality and intellectual artist of enough repute to lend considerable prestige to a movement that was threatening the foundations of the Edwardian social order. Emmeline Pankhurst, her daughters, and other prominent suffrage leaders were only the outspoken tip of a larger iceberg that questioned traditional attitudes which subordinated the status of women. But those who openly endorsed feminism in the early 1900's were clearly the radical fringe of a still-unpopular social revolution. An accurate reconstruction of Robins' position in the suffrage movement identifies her as a writer first and a politician second. She was instrumental to the movement because her independence and established reputation were previously acknowledged: her public knew her from a number of important achievements

on the stage and in print.

In the 1890's, Elizabeth Robins was at the forefront of efforts to produce Ibsen's plays on the London stage. An American-born actress, she came to London as the young widow of George Parks, determined to succeed in the English theater. She had been successful in America while touring with Edwin Booth and James O'Neill, and with Parks she had acted in the well-known Boston Museum Company. After a period of struggling to get work with commercial theaters in popular drama, she found in Ibsen's plays an exciting challenge to her intellectual and artistic talents. She won recognition as the creator of Hedda Gabler and Hilda Wangel, earning the approval and friendship of William Archer, Henry James, and George Bernard Shaw. More significantly, each of her portrayals of Ibsen's women were achievements in independent management. No professional actor-manager would produce Ibsen without some distortion of his dramaturgy. Beerbohm Tree, for instance, rewrote *A Doll's House* so that Krogstad was a starring villain, and played Dr. Stockmann as a comic entertainer. Robins, however, maintained an allegiance to the script that was surprising to her associates. Using her knowledge of Norwegian she adjusted Archer's stilted translations to dialogue that was accurate andactable. She insisted — against Henry James' objections — that she would wear the one simple dress which Ibsen specified for Hilda Wangel. Both men later recognized that her decisions were right and they contributed to her success by writing inspired essays on this new phase in the acceptance of Ibsen. Shaw's reviews of her productions combined praise for Robins' initiative and talent with a criticism of the theatrical conditions that made the production of Ibsen's plays so daring.

Along with the series of independently produced and directed Ibsen and non-Ibsen productions, Robins began to write fiction under a pseudonym. When her identity was disclosed in 1898, she had established a reputation as "C.E. Raimond" with three novels and a collection of stories. The disclosure of the sex of the author of *George Mandeville's Husband* (1894) and *The Open Question* (1898) surprised the literary world. Her previously established stage reputation added more excitement to the discovery, for the Ibsenite woman was revealed as the author of a story in which the male point of view indicts a woman who builds a literary career at the expense of her family's needs. When "C.E. Raimond's" real identity became known, the sympathy Robins had created for the husband of "George Mandeville" turned into an effectively ironic comment on the accept-

ance of women novelists. After a lapse of six years, Robins began to write under her own name, transforming her personal experiences in Alaska into an adventure tale of the Klondike Gold Rush in *The Magnetic North* (1904). She made up for her exclusion of women from that book with *A Dark Lantern* (1905), an enormously popular best seller and the first novel she wrote from a point of view closest to the central female persona.

The development in artistry between that first woman-oriented novel and *The Convert* is even more remarkable than the growth of her political consciousness between 1905 and 1907. Politically she had applied her new awareness of the suffrage cause to arrive at resolutions in the two books that were worlds apart in their feminist stance. *A Dark Lantern* presents a woman who succumbs completely to her mysterious doctor's influence over her life. *The Convert* portrays a woman who finds strength in the sisterhood of the suffragist cause after a lover's abandonment denies her the experience of motherhood.

The foundation for the converted heroine's story came from Robins' own experiences in the Women's Social and Political Union. She contributed articles to their pamphlets and speeches to their fundraising banquets, accompanied the Pankhursts to the open-air platforms, and was the president of Women Writers' Franchise League. Then, in the Spring of 1907, her play *Votes for Women* was staged so successfully that its run was extended and she was praised as a masterful new playwright. *The Convert*, published that same fall, is the story of *Votes for Women* reshaped as a novel. But even though the same characters come to the same resolution in the play and the novel, *The Convert* is more than a novelization of a box-office success. Robins had no hesitation in labelling her play a "dramatic tract." The novel, however, has artistic integrity beyond its immediate political purposes.

The literary quality of *The Convert* is best established by detailed analysis of three essential factors in its composition: first, the last five chapters of the novel are practically a word-for-word rewrite of the dramatic treatment of the same story in *Votes for Women*; second, Robins used real events of the Suffrage campaign to create an historically authentic background, easily recognized by her first readers and still providing invaluable documentation of the activities of the W.S.P.U.; and third, *A Dark Lantern* and *The Convert* have similarities in structure, scope, patterns, and themes that reveal a unity of design and a connection between the two works that emphasizes Robins' development and achievement in *The Convert*. The discussion of the later novel will center around the first two of these con-

siderations, but first, it is important to note the relationship between *The Convert* and Robins' preceding novel, *A Dark Lantern*, as a context for the accurate consideration of the suffrage novel. The plot of each novel revolves around a man's decision to hide his past sexual exploits from the woman he has chosen to marry. In *A Dark Lantern* Katharine Dereham fights to understand the secret, dark past of her enigmatic Heathcliffian doctor up to the last confrontation, but finally accepts Garth Vincent as the unique mystery he is. Vida Levering in *The Convert* is the woman in Parliament Member Geoffrey Stoner's past, reappearing to confront him with his earlier desertion of her just as he plans to marry young Jean Dunbarton. In this resolution, however, Jean's discovery of what Stoner has done to Vida takes on a larger meaning when both women ask for Stoner's endorsement of suffrage as a token of the recognition of his earlier irresponsibility.

Like much of her writing, the endings of these two Robins' novels grip the reader by her masterful ability to communicate compelling emotional encounters. Her beginning chapters, however, seem tediously occupied with unnecessary, almost detached, prefatory material. This "prologue"-quality of her technique, unless understood for what it is, exposes her works to the criticism that they lack focus. The prologue-dominated construction shows that Elizabeth Robins was grounded in the Victorian tradition that demanded completeness of exposition, completeness in a sentence, completeness in a character's motivational impulses, and completeness in the background used to communicate an expressed emotion.

In *A Dark Lantern* "The Prologue" is a separate section of the book. In it, Katharine's experiences with a German prince are detailed in order to give her later romance with the mysterious doctor a special meaning. In the main part of the book she is virtually isolated from any human contact by Vincent's ordered rest cure. Perhaps as a result of her confinement, Katharine falls under his control, hating yet longing for the emotions he arouses in her. Garth Vincent shows none of the predictably reciprocal affections, and part of Katharine's response to this man with the dark-lantern face is that she recognizes that it is he who needs to be cured. She learns that some injurious incident in his past stands between his willingness to love her and his mistrust of all women. Katharine's need to know everything becomes the focus of the the improbable love story. Through a final angry misunderstanding Katharine comes to a realization that Garth — like all men — has not the capacity to linger over a past that once brought pain and regret.

Without the details of the prologue, the reader could not grasp the impact of Katharine's final relinquishment of her search to know Garth's story. Robins constructs an account of Katharine's affairs with the Prince that lingers over the separate action of the later part of the novel. She is both the willing determinator of her romance with Anton and the frightened victim of his attempt to rape her. When she finds out later that his moral decadence included affairs with many women, she is glad that her isolation protects her against his further entreaties. At the same time she becomes unconsciously dependent on her healer-imprisoner. She cannot help but fall under the influence of the emotionally-wounded doctor and devotes herself to him, first as patient, then as mistress, and finally as wife. Her determination to know the story of his life is not appeased until a final confrontation makes her see that Garth's cure depends upon her unquestioning acceptance that his past is nothing to him. The final sentences would seem like a woman's pat submission unless they are seen in the context of Katharine's own past. Robins concludes, voicing Katharine's point of view more directly than she has previously:

... She had thought that other husbands, close to their wives in sympathy and devotion, told them their past. But did they? Not one had told, or could tell everything. To any but the least sensitive, even the vaguest reminder of these things set the nerves jarring. And yet this source of pain lay behind every marriage made late enough to be founded on the rock of proved fitness. Her good fortune it was, that Garth would never make those old days live again, by any word of his. They seemed the more securely dead. They were as if they had never been.<sup>1</sup>

Structurally, in both *A Dark Lantern* and *The Convert*, there is a powerful relationship between the prologue and final impact, but in *The Convert* the relationship of the prologue to the main action is clear. Essentially, the extensive material, which Robins adds as introduction to the events originally dramatized as *Votes for Women*, serves as her prologue.

A further relationship between *The Convert* and *A Dark Lantern* is Robins' development of the imagistic patterns in each novel. Again, the device is tried in the earlier book and perfected in the second. In the suffrage novel Robins builds upon the earlier portrayal of Vida as social humorist in order to emphasize her acquired political

outspokenness. Robins also emphasizes Vida's emotional attachment to the children she could not have, thus stressing symbolically that the franchise issue is a minor goal compared to the reforms needed in social responsibilities and moral values.

In *A Dark Lantern* more traditional images are repeated for accumulative effect. The first of these is the hoof-beats, which Katharine always associates with the day of her ride in the park with Anton. Several times Robins repeats the sound equation of the impatient horses to arouse Katharine's and the reader's anticipation of a passionate, fear-filled, and potentially violent situation. At each repetition a briefer and more condensed image begins to have a stronger and stronger effect until, in her final use of the device, Robins needs only to suggest the possibility of Garth's dreaded arrival with Katharine's thought, "Hush, was that a horse galloping?" Before she identifies the sound, Vincent is trying the door she has locked with a command, "Open the door" (*DL*, p. 397). The effect is to create suspense by eclipsing the action leading to the final confrontation.

When Robins repeats and re-emphasizes the references to Katharine's poetry she uses an image to capture the essential difference between men and women that Katharine only partially realizes. Robins is critical and ironic when she first discloses Katharine's inclination to versify; the girl, unfortunately, "was born into a society where manifestation of any such definite talent would be too great a peculiarity to be pleasant" (*DL*, p. 11). Repeatedly, Katharine's special talent comes between herself and Garth, and Katharine feels herself belittled in his eyes. When her collection of love poems is about to be published Katharine thinks:

What rot he must be thinking it! And not he alone. Little books of verse were always dropping, still born, from the London press. Hers just another, like the rest. Those sonnets she had written out of such an eager heart. How dull, belated, lacking in significance they had looked forth from the proof. Ah, they had not stood the proof, those frail little things of her making! (*DL*, p. 301)

In the final scenes, Robins has so well prepared the symbolic importance of Katharine's verse that she needs only to have Katharine notice "the white vellum book, wrenched and marred, the lock broken off" (*DL*, p. 396) in order to make her recognize the violence of Garth's suspicions. Suddenly, Katharine sees that what she keeps

from him has angered and weakened him, and she relinquishes her fervor to know his own past, not in the attitude of submission, but in the spirit of equality.

In *The Convert* Elizabeth Robins captures a change as profound in her heroine as the transformation of Katharine Dereham into the unquestioning wife. With the aid of a more integrated prologue in this book, Vida Levering moves just as far towards self-revelation as Katharine Dereham does. Both works successfully convince the reader of the woman's new beliefs. Here, however, the woman's final stance is the antithesis of Katharine's willingness to close her eyes to a man's irresponsible past. Vida Levering extracts from Geoffrey Stoner a payment that cannot erase the effects of his abandonment of her but does guarantee his important political support of the suffrage platform. Moreover, Robins is stylistically effective in *The Convert* because she argues on behalf of the suffrage cause — one that to her was always more than a question of voting rights — more comprehensively than she does in her polemical drama written beforehand. What makes the play a political tract and the novel a more complex artistic and rhetorical structure is the groundwork she lays for the confrontations that make up the action of the play. Themes, images and recurring scenes are given increased meaning retroactively in the novel. Vida is presented in the play as the already converted suffrage speaker, upsetting the weekend visitors at Lady John's with her plans for a shelter for homeless women and reminding people that the Suffragists' antics they laughed at a few weeks earlier have now got to be taken seriously. In the novel however, Vida's first social function is to provide the men on either side of her with frothy dinner conversation. She uses her sense of humor to rescue an embarrassed member of Parliament from another woman's insistent talk about "The Bill." The only indication that Vida does not play at the game of feminine conversation with complete sincerity is an under-her-breath remark admitting she loathes this method of entertaining.<sup>2</sup> Thus, long before Vida allows herself to listen to political arguments, the reader suspects how critical she is of woman's decorative function.

In the novel Vida continues to excel by her ease at conversation, often at the expense of the suffrage platform she knows little about. At a later social discussion, a good round of "Kick the Suffrage Ball" extracts from her a clever remark that she considers the suffrage uproar more like a "mud-puddle" than the "precipice" which another lady worries that it is (*C*, p.56). Even when she redirects some of the ridicule of the suffragists to chastise the arrogant Dick Farnborough's

derision of their political activities, she is thanked by a male friend with the remark, "'It's great fun having you in the world!'" Novelist Robins adds the perceptive comment, "He spoke as though he had personally arranged this provision against dullness for his latter end" (C, p. 174). The establishment of Vida as the ironic humorist in the first part of the book makes credible her ability to respond conversationally for expedient purposes in the last two chapters. In these chapters — corresponding to the third act of the play — the reader perceives a much more complex web of doubts and motivating causes than the playgoer witnesses. Vida Levering of the play is seen bent on only one purpose, but the longer unfolding of the heroine's character in *The Convert* makes clear all the memories Vida has of herself as a social accessory now that she is an organizer for meaningful reform.

Robins' expanded novel form illustrates a more significant structuring because she shows not just one Trafalgar Square open-air Suffrage meeting but three earlier ones preceding the climactic demonstration in which Vida addresses the crowd from the platform (Act II of *Votes for Women*, Chapter XVI of *The Convert*). In the play, the audience is given only two weak clues that Vida is new at speaking publicly for the cause: she has boldly come forward to quiet the crowd, loses her train of thought, and a comment from a bystander indicates that she is a speaker who has not been heard before. Despite that remark, the play stresses the security with which Vida commands the audience.

In the novel Robins does not turn over her plot to the suffrage message from the speaker's platform simply to provide her readers with official Women's Union arguments. It is clear from the four times that Vida attends a demonstration that the progression of Vida's involvement is the main point of these passages. In her first trip to the Sunday afternoon demonstration, Vida and her half-sister have disguised themselves in thick veils and tattered gowns in order not to be recognized. Vida claims she needs a second trip — this would be her last — but cannot revisit the Suffrage meetings without another elaborate pretext. This time she tricks her newly-hired maid into accompanying her, ostensibly for a walk to some other destination, but they happen upon the meeting, and Vida pretends that her curiosity is spontaneous and persuades her servant to hear the speakers.

Those first two encounters with the suffrage debate stimulate Vida to invite a Union leader to her home, not to be converted, she carefully explains, but because she is at the "inquiry stage" (C, p. 154). The suffragette leader supplies a persuasive argument including

the rationale for carrying dog whips — to prevent indecent maltreatment by the police force — and the testimony that women's responses to these implications of discreet sexual brutality vary widely depending on whether a woman's social position allows her to contemplate such an offense. The private conversation make Vida's support complete, and the account of her third foray into Trafalgar Square shows Vida on the platform. She is distinctly an associate, not an organizer, and refuses to speak to the unruly mob even though the Suffrage chairman encourages her and other women to try out their capabilities. Vida Levering sits "nursing the handbills" (C, p. 187), only confident to argue her new-found beliefs on a one-to-one level. While other unpractised speakers struggle to master the crowd, Vida quietly feeds her conviction to the companion at her side.

The novel thus prepares for Vida's platform debut more thoroughly than the play, and in the novel she is introduced on the platform as an inexperienced speaker who needs to be given more consideration. As a consequence of this, even though the arguments used by the Vida of the play and novel are identical, the conditions under which the reader understands she is there are dissimilar. Once again, Robins uses the scope of her novel to the best advantage. She has not simply lengthened the material of her suffrage argument but used it to record the changes in Vida's own conviction; and through the progression of her heroine's conversion, she has allowed for the reader's affinity to the same viewpoint.

In both the play and the novel, Vida's speech to the crowd provides the occasion for Stoner and Vida to recognize each other. Before that recognition there are a handful of hints in the play, substantially more indications in the novel, that the two have known each other previously and have sought to avoid each other's presence. Both are very much taken aback by the exposure. After she succumbs to a momentary queasiness at the first sight of Stoner, Vida recovers her speech with a reference to the hardships that women know from labor in childbirth. The use of that topic is significant. Later, in the series of private conversations at the close of the story, it is evident that Vida's loss of her own child when there was no alternative but a badly performed abortion has driven home more painfully to her than it has to most people the special sensitivity that women have towards human dignity. Here on the platform her speeches to the crowd are the occasion for Jean to recognize Stoner's past association with Vida. Struggling to regain her composure, Vida continues:

"... I noticed when a previous speaker quoted the Labour Party, you applauded. Some of you here, I gather, call yourselves Labour men. Every woman who has borne a child is a Labour woman. No man among you can judge what she goes through in her hour of darkness."

Jean's eyes had dropped from her lover's set white face early in the recital. But she whispered his name.

He seemed not to hear.

The speaker up there had caught her fluttering breath, and went on so low that people strained to follow.

"In that great agony, even under the best conditions that money and devotion can buy, many a woman falls into temporary mania, and not a few go down to death. In the case of this poor little abandoned working girl, what man can be the fit judge of her deeds in that awful moment of half-crazed temptation? Women know of these things as those know burning who have walked through fire."

Stoner looked down at the girl at his side. He saw her hands go up to her throat as though she were suffocating. The young face, where some harsh knowledge was struggling for birth, was in pity turned away from the man she loved.

(C, p. 269)

While Vida is criticizing the crowd for its condemnation of a working woman who abandoned her child, Robins is showing that Jean knows the complete story of Vida's abandonment by Stoner.

In both the third act of the play and the last chapter of the book, Vida accuses Stoner of many hard facts, some touching her personal circumstances, and some indicting his general attitude. In the play these come across as bitter polemic, but in the novel the reader is given a more thorough picture of Vida. Levering denied the opportunity of motherhood. In the book Robins adroitly intensifies Vida's loss by using the entire first chapter to describe Vida's visit to her dinner hostess's nursery to spend time with Mrs. Freddy Turnbridge's two young children. Before Vida's winning and artificial appearance at the dinner party, Robins offers a precious portrait of a woman who nourishes the spirits of children and is nourished by them. Little Sara and Cecil's impulses are spontaneous and right amidst the world of proper duties and keeping in one's place. Vida's affinity to them puts her later social posture into its real context. They eagerly tell Vida of

their "mountaineering" escapade to the top of the wardrobe. Vida charms Sara by letting her hold her glittering necklace and comforts Cecil by wrapping her close to him. At that point, her absorption in a serious mood alarms the children, and the reader is drawn closer to Vida's own sense of pain and longing:

As she sat there holding him, something came into her face, guiltless though it was of any traceable change, without the verifiable movement of a muscle, something none the less that would have minded the beholder uneasily to search the eyes for tears, and finding no tears there, to feel no greater sense of reassurance. (C, p. 6)

The morning after the dinner party Vida's lifetime maid gives her notice of leave. The ensuing conversation supplies more texture to the childlessness motif and provides the information that Vida has lived alone and away from her family between the ages of eighteen and twenty. It is at first difficult for the duty-bound Rachel Wark to explain to thirty-two year-old unmarried Vida that she has given up hope of ever having the chance to care for children while in Vida's service. Since it is the care of children that she craves, she has accepted a position as housekeeper for a widowed garden-farmer, the father of five. She is nervous that Vida herself might be contemplating marriage. The fifty year-old servant would consider either the possibility of Vida marrying or the chance that the gardener will propose to her as "sacrifices" for the greater happiness of having children to care for. Vida's understanding dismissal of Wark communicates Vida's sureness of her own childless future. Additionally, the maid's regret about the sobering change that came over Vida in the two years she lived on her own reveals something uncomfortable in the younger woman's past:

"I don't like leaving you, miss. I always remember how, that time before — the only time I was ever away from you since you was a baby — how different I found you when you came back . . . You gave me a great deal of trouble when you was little, but it nearly broke my heart to come back and find you quieted down and wise-like." (C, p. 29)

Surprisingly, Robins provides a glimpse of Stoner himself with his cousins, the Tunbridge youngsters, in a later chapter. At first it appears that seeking the children is an attempt to avoid Vida; the

moment he hears that she is due to arrive, he absents himself to entertain them. At the end of the episode, Vida is introduced to the scene of Stoner playing with the children and their mother's remark that,

"Nobody knows the very nicest side of Geoffrey do they? . . . Nobody who hasn't seen him with children?" (C, p. 150)

When Vida replies, "I never saw him with children," the proud mother encourages her to contemplate the scene and calls out to Sara and Cecil to welcome another favorite guest. The children, however, are too preoccupied with Stoner to notice Vida.

This incident is minor, but it makes clear that Robins means her book's title to stand for the conversion of others besides Vida Levering. The number of characters who are influenced in the novel support this view. Lord Borrodaile — a character who does not even appear in the play — changes from the mocker who had thanked Vida for bringing fun into the world, to a sympathizer who accompanies Vida to the platform after she is convinced that she needs to support the Suffragists. Jean's conversion, although less prominent, is brought into focus by Robins' use of narrative detail which she cannot make use of in the play except with stage directions. Stoner undergoes a philosophical reorientation as well. He first resists Vida's tactics because he feels bitter that she is using his private behavior against his public career. By the end of Vida's testimony — in which she explains her lack of personal motivation, for she has moved beyond her own private despair — Stoner asks her,

"What can I do? . . . For the real you . . . Not the Reformer, or the would-be politician — for the woman I so unwillingly hurt." (C, p. 302-303)

Once again, the further scope of Stoner's character as presented in the novel makes his final position less imposed and less subservient to the political end of Robins' play.

In both *Votes for Women* and *The Convert* Vida triumphs when she walks out with Stoner's telegram in her hand — the "political dynamite" that will save for him his Parliament seat because he will pledge his support of the Suffrage bill. In the drama it seems as if Vida's only goal is to get possession of the political statement. In the novel that message is secondary to a greater understanding arising from the final conversation. Vida's own position changes from one of

demanding payment from Stoner ("Pay and pay and pay — and find yourself in debt — for a thing you'll never be able to give me back. And when you come to die, say to yourself, 'I paid all my creditors but one'" — C, p. 294.) to one in which she accounts for the necessity of a more broadly-based ethic:

"But the time has come when a woman may look about her and say, What general significance has my secret pain? Does it 'join on' to anything? And I find it *does*. I'm no longer simply a woman who has stumbled on the way.' . . . 'I'm one who has got up bruised and bleeding, wiped the dust from her hands and the tears from her face — and said to herself not merely: Here's one luckless woman! but — here is a stone of stumbling to many. Let's see if it can't be moved out of other women's way. And she calls people to come and help. No mortal man, let alone a woman, *by herself*, can move that rock of offence. But," she ended with a sudden somber flare of enthusiasm, "if *many* help, Geoffrey, the thing can be done." (C, p. 303-4)

In the strictest sense, the difference between the play and the novel is the novel's long preliminary to the conflicts between a suffrage organizer and a Conservative member of Parliament whose lives intersected fourteen years earlier. But the prologue-like preparation also allows Robins to assert her own realization that voting rights were representative of a more significant change. She permits the Vida Levering of the novel to express this attitude midway through her investigation of the Women Suffragists. When asked jokingly whether her recent contact with their politics has shown her "something new under the sun," she replies,

"Well, perhaps not so new, though it seemed new to me. But something differently looked at. Why do we pretend that all conversion is to some religious dogma — why not to a view of life?" (C, p. 143)

This new view of life was occurring to many Englishmen and women, and Robins might be accused of capitalizing on the mood of the times were it not for her own deeply experienced identification with the Suffrage cause. *Votes for Women* was conceived in the fall of 1906 and written in time to open for matinees at the Court Theatre

starting on April 9, 1907. The play was so substantial a success that its run was extended an additional two weeks — a considerable achievement for 1907. The tone of the piece is decisively partisan. While *The Convert*'s viewpoint is no less pro-suffrage, the novel is artistically more effective. Curiously, the reason for this is that Robins chose, later in 1907, to explore the earlier origins of the suffrage movement rather than rewrite her drama to contain the further developments of the suffrage campaign through 1907. The run of the play coincided with the first spring marked by Women's Parliamentary Conventions, by the first mass marches, and by the first widespread brutality of the police during suffrage protests. The support for and activities of the W.S.P.U. grew so extensively during 1907 that Robins' account of the struggle for a single politician's pledge of support could have been considered out of date by the fall of that year. The significance of Robins' achievement in *The Convert* is only fully realized when it is recognized that her rewriting of the fictional situation in *Votes for Women* is prefaced by a historically accurate background grounded in events of the earliest phases of the suffrage struggle.

In the play, the possibilities of Stoner's promotion to a Cabinet post upon the victory of the Conservative Party is entirely hypothetical. Liberals held power throughout the first decade of the century and had achieved an astounding victory and return to power in the General Election of 1906. Robins of course had no need to retract or alter her fictional possibility of Conservative rule. It is nonetheless noteworthy that Robins corresponds Vida's awakening to the real events of an earlier period of ground-breaking suffrage activity. Contemporary reviews of *Votes for Women* commended the Trafalgar Square scene in Act II for its naturalism, and Sylvia Pankhurst gives Robins' novel credit for recording the description of spontaneous open-air meetings in Pankhurst's book, *The Suffragette*. So far as I know, these are the few places where Robins' detailed accounts of the suffrage struggle in England are given appropriate credit, though her record of the early impact of Suffragist politics cannot be overlooked in any complete examination of early feminist activities in England.

In the character of Ernestine Blunt, for instance, Robins gives a thinly disguised portrait of Mary Gawthorpe, a superb political speaker who was the main attraction at early stages of the attempts to win support through open-air meetings.<sup>4</sup> Recent accounts that intend to give a comprehensive account of the entire voting rights campaign, such as Andrew Rosen's *Rise Up, Women!* (1974), mention

Gawthorpe briefly, and then emphasize not her popularity and success, but her break with the W.S.P.U. leadership when the Pankhursts decided that the Suffrage Union could no longer benefit from being associated with the Labour Party.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Chisholm in the novel is clearly a fictionalized Emmeline Pankhurst and Lothian Scot is the Labour leader Keir Hardie. Yet, while there is some benefit to attaching right names to Robins' characters, the book's larger contribution is its record of the growth of an important social consciousness. The atmosphere created at the Trafalgar Square Open Questioning of the suffrage speakers and the secrecy with which women had to surround their pro-suffrage activities are valuable but overlooked references to a sparsely detailed era in history. The precise time-table of events in the early part of the novel is particularly important, for the suffrage cause in 1906 had not the same recognition as the suffrage position in 1909 or 1912.

Moreover, Robins' suffrage essays indicate that she was exposed to the suffrage point of view in circumstances almost identical to Vida Levering's. Writing on "The Feminist Movement in England" for *Collier's Weekly* of June 20, 1907, Robins testifies:

It turns out that not only have men a great deal still to learn about women, but that women have a great deal to learn about themselves. I have been prosecuting my education in this direction almost daily since a certain memorable afternoon in Trafalgar Square when I first heard women talking politics in public. I went out of shamefaced curiosity, my head full of masculine criticism as to woman's limitations, her well-known inability to stick to the point, her poverty in logic and in humour, and the impossibility, in any case, of her coping with the mob.

I had found in my own heart hitherto no firm assurance that these charges were not anchored in fact. But 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.<sup>6</sup>

In her fiction she was, after writing *The Convert*, never far from expressing the same ardent consciousness that Vida Levering achieves. The Suffrage movement brought home to Robins the essential masculinity of most of women's earlier literature. In her first of many printed suffrage articles she writes:

Let us remember it was only yesterday that women in any number began to write for the public prints. But in taking up the pen, what did this new recruit conceive to be her task? To proclaim her own or other women's actual thoughts and feelings? Far from it. Her task, as she naturally and even inevitably conceived it, was to imitate as nearly as possible the method, but above all the point of view, of man.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Convert* Robins broke the rule of writing in the style of and from the point of view of the male "masters" of literature. The book went through several printings in rapid succession, and money she earned from it enabled her to establish a rest home for professional women. Unfortunately, the recognition Elizabeth Robins should be receiving seventy years later is yet to be established by the current generation of feminist scholars. Robins' reworking of her story and the mastery of her technique in *The Convert* does, in this instance at least, prove that suffrage literature has an artistic significance beyond its temporary persuasive purpose.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Robins, *A Dark Lantern* (London and New York: Macmillan Co., 1905), p. 400. All further references to this novel appear in the text abbreviated as *DL*.
- <sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Robins, *The Convert* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Macmillan's Standard Library, 1907), p. 23. All further references to this novel appear in the text abbreviated as *C*.
- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Robins, *Votes for Women*, (London: Mills and Boon, Ltd., n.d.), p. 71.
- <sup>4</sup> Antonia Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973) p. 26. The Labour leanings of Gawthorpe, her popularity, short stature, and superior speaking ability match Robins' descriptions of the fiery and petite Ernestine Blunt.
- <sup>5</sup> Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women!* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 70, 71.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Robins, *Way Stations*, a collection of speeches and articles dealing with the Women's Movement (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1913), p. 40.
- <sup>7</sup> Robins, "Woman's Secret," Published originally by the Garden City Press, n.d. (circa 1905), reprinted in *Way Stations*, p. 5.

## DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS: THE WORLD OF SUSAN LENOX

Sandra L. Katz

During the late nineteenth century, the American dream that it was possible for anyone to "make it," to climb the ladder of social and financial success became a pervasive literary as well as cultural myth, mainly because it had been shaped into a narrative and thematic pattern with certain stock characters, actions, and assumptions in the one hundred and seventeen "rags to riches" novels of Horatio Alger. This Alger myth, although ludicrously simplistic and tediously repetitive, had an enormous influence on American writers. Of course, the most significant novelists did not just incorporate the myth into their novels; rather, they questioned it, asking, for example, what if the hero were not the plucky, honest, cheerful, frugal, polite, manly, white Anglo-Saxon boy of the Alger books, but an immigrant — or even a woman? The novels of major writers, such as Twain, Howells, Alcott, Wharton, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway can be seen to deal variously with the Alger myth.

Yet, there is another writer whose treatment of the Alger myth shows an honesty, originality, and boldness in thought and style that has not been recognized. David Graham Phillips has been neglected, perhaps because he did not write very much, but his two volume

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