

Introducing Feminist Political Drama Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women*

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Abstract: Introducing Elizabeth Robins to students is a challenge because Robins is a minor figure in American and British drama of the early twentieth century and her literary work is overtly political. The contributions of Robins were recovered by feminist scholarship in the eighties and have undergone a transformation with critical opinion focusing on her abilities as a writer. Her famous play, *Votes for Women* (1907), is an investigation of the feminist maxim: "the personal is the political." The play demonstrates the gradual conversion of an apathetic philanthropist, Miss L., into a militant advocate of more rights for women and depends on spectators to enhance its political themes.

Elizabeth Robins was a leading feminist playwright in British and American theater in the early twentieth century who wrote plays supporting political and social rights for women in Britain and America. During her life time, Robins achieved moderate public fame and students have a slight knowledge of Robins because her literary work rarely appears in anthologies of American or British literature. The scarcity of women writers is a vital topic in literary history and Oscar Brockett's *A Century of Innovations: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since the Late Nineteenth Century* discusses the lack of female playwrights in modern drama. Robins' anonymity, however, is a special case that can be ascribed to a variety of reasons and her literary output was considered by public opinion of the early twentieth century as overtly political and unpopular.

Literary biography of Robins acknowledges the role feminist scholarship in the 1980s played in recovering her many contributions to British theater. Earlier critics focused on Robins' primary importance as the leading actress in Ibsen's plays and as a literary friend to successful male writers such as Henry James and William Archer. Later, feminist scholarship came to emphasize her other roles as stage manager, playwright and critic. In the 1990s feminists emphasized Robins' influential role as an activist at the turn of the century and belonging to the tradition of women who were struggling to gain access to political enfranchisement.

In literary history Robins is presented as closely associated with zealous feminists of her time who were trying to bring radical social transformation by presenting controversial political subjects. The entry on Robins in *Contemporary Authors*, for example, describes Robins as an author accentuated by feminists and as a writer of fiction whose importance lies in helping "to construct a modern notion of female identity, just as women became politically and culturally enfranchised" (331). Moreover, Robins' literary work could be placed within the scope of a trend in drama of the twentieth century which is described by George Lukacs in "The Sociology of Modern Drama" as a "drama of individualism" characterized by a "force, an intensity and an exclusiveness no other drama ever had" (935). Robins in her literary work presents the readers with female characters who are devoted to improving women's social conditions and for Vida Levering, the major protagonist in *Votes for Women* (1907) the answer inevitably lies in extending more political rights to women. The play's focus on the particularity of the political issues related to English society at the turn of the century does not obstruct its universal themes in relation to raising political awareness to women. On the contrary, the political content emphasizes its universal interpretation because individuals are inevitably enmeshed in politics.

Elizabeth Robins as an American born playwright and an active feminist in the British and American theater in the early twentieth century emphasized the political status of western women as falling under pervasively patriarchal rules. In addition to social restrictions and denial of political rights, Robins emphasized in her dramatizations of female characters the fact that women are apathetic and inactive in political affairs. Her plays appeal to universal themes and grievances often iterated by women in male dominated societies so as to encourage women to take a more concentrated action to combat inferiority. Elizabeth Robins, however, suffered as a leading feminist and for trying to acquire more political rights for women because *Votes for Women* (1907) achieved moderate artistic praise and limited financial profits.

In London, the play was staged at the Court Theater for twenty one performances. It even made less financial profit in the United States with only six performances (Kelley

305). The primary reason is obviously the political content of the play which seemed to thwart theater-goers. *Alan's Wife* (1895), her known play, even though not aggressively political, similarly faced commercial failure. The financial state of the staged plays sheds light on Robins' inability to vent her political beliefs to the early twentieth century public. The problems Robins faced in the theater were not only of the plays' inability to draw profits but also of her personal dedication to political reform. She lived a long life in the theater business, and the personal involvement with the female enfranchisement cause prompted her to stage political plays, an admirable but very unacceptable action for her contemporary audience. The other reason for the inability to win support as a writer was ironically her dramatic performance of Ibsen's influential female roles on the British stage, which she sought to over dramatize in her literary work.

Penny Farfan in "From *Hedda Gabler* to *Votes for Women*: Elizabeth Robins' Early Feminist Critique of Ibsen," considers Robins' relationship to Ibsen. Farfan perceives the dramatic representation of Ibsen's female heroines as a negative experience that molded Robins in her acting and writing career (59-78). According to Sue Thomas, Robins was aware of the influence of Ibsen on her dramatic performance and literary career. This can be traced in *Votes for Women* because the play is an attempt by Robins to illustrate her conviction that Ibsen's interest in the cause of actresses should not be confused with the idea of sympathy towards women's freedom (60). Farfan and other critics have come to the conclusion that Robins' expansion of political ideas reflected badly on the public reception of the play.

Robins' passion for political reform and the role it played in her career as a playwright highlights Robins' miscalculation of downplaying the nature of the theater as a commercial enterprise. Sue Thomas in "Sexual Matter and Votes for Women" focuses on Robins' political affiliations and its influence on her career (47-70). Similarly, other critics have pointed out the intricate relationship Robins had both in the theater and in politics as in the biography by Joanne Gates. Also, Joanna Townsend in "Elizabeth Robins: Hysteria, Politics and Performance" described Elizabeth Robins' zeal for reform

in spite of the apparent futility of combating common standards in the theater, the literary market, and patriarchal society (102-20).

Even Elizabeth Robins knew that the theater provides a relatively financial security for talented actresses and was not expecting huge financial rewards. However, she was stunned to discover her recreation of Ibsen's strong dramatic female characters as devastatingly unappealing to theater goers. Robins reflecting on her work in *Ibsen and the Actress, Theatre and Friendship* acknowledges the bitter fact presented by Henry James in his correspondence on the staging of her play, *Votes for Women* describing the theater as an "abyss of treachery" (269). As James points out implicitly, a play with a very clear political agenda is predictably going to be unsuccessful and thus a managerial decision would be to stage the play at a time which would have not interfered with the commercial status of the theater. Probably Robins innately knew the reasons and had earlier turned to writing fiction as a source of income because the genre is less publicly provocative. She doubtlessly realized that staging characters personally motivated into political reform were not going to win public recognition.

Nevertheless, Robins insisted on creating fictional characters often based on personal experiences drawn from various trips and encounters with people and events to point out her political purpose of extending the right to vote for women. However, she remained intensely private as Victoria Moesner and Joan Gates state in the introduction to the diary of the Alaskan trip entitled, *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900* (1-12). In "A Century in View: From Suffrage to the 1990s," Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt reflect on her achievements in terms of requesting more political rights for women (1-19). As a feminist playwright, Robins sought to stage in *Votes for Women* a personal tragedy of a fictional woman to raise public awareness to the benefits of giving more rights for women. The play is both a theoretical discussion and an activist proposal for a collaborative effort targeting women to become more involved as a necessary step in political reform.

The play portrays a skeptical female protagonist who is eventually transformed into a zealous advocate for social and political alteration. Vida Levering gradually comes to

the realization from the driving force of her personal experiences on the necessity of addressing problems facing most women in society by providing long term solutions. *Votes for Women* is unique; unlike other plays composed by women writers of the time, the political content is central and the theme lies in attaining the sympathy of the audience to highlight the need for political reform by bringing a female character who experienced a personal tragedy due to the absence of laws supporting women. The playwright insisted on the use of the personal as a motivation for political reform for women in society and as the logical method to provoke women into combating prejudice. *Votes for Women* demonstrates "the feminist maxim 'the personal is political'" and its modest commercial success testifies to its unpopularity.

Elizabeth Robins' insistence on choosing a "militant" protagonist, who through a personal tragedy comes to advocate the rights for women, enhanced public disapproval for *Votes for Women*. The dramatic representation of her major character did not achieve the sympathy that Robins hoped to elicit even though the protagonist as critics have pointed out was molded after Hedda Gabler, the role Robins portrayed as an actress, to influence and change people's perceptions into being more sympathetic to giving women political rights. The play is initially a dramatic form of her earlier published novel, *The Convert* (1905). Even though the novel narrated the same anecdote of the play, it was not critically denounced. The moderate success of the novel seemed to have encouraged Robins to embark on a new mission of expanding her political views to the public. However, there are differences between the play and the novel. The play, unlike the novel, provides a medium of forcefully confronting the audience with the personal involvement of the protagonist and the uprising of the crowd in the second act shows the social difficulties of giving political rights for women

Both the novel and the play demonstrate how changing social ideas are difficult even for women motivated by their own misfortunes. The major theme in her literary work emphasizes that any political system excluding women from voting can acquire legitimacy by means of public concession and Robins displays her anger because most women are included in the game. The play at moments becomes cynical of women

because, even Vida Levering, the main character in the play, was not easily drawn into becoming a political activist. The play's three acts are structured so as to trace the transformation of Vida, who appeared at the beginning of the play as an enthusiastic philanthropist but who soon realized that charity targeted to social improvement was ineffectual in enhancing the living conditions of women.

In the exposition of the play, Vida Levering, an accomplished women residing at the house of Lady John, is portrayed as an incredibly popular guest and as a philanthropist enthusiastic in her charitable works targeting displaced women. Miss Levering is described by Lady John and another guest, a young man named Farnborough, as a socially desirable person whom they have known for a short period of time. Miss Levering is also an attractive woman who looks down on suitors and socially jokes that her future husband "would be just entering Eton" (9). As events unravel in the first act a precedent liaison in the life of Miss L. becomes a topic of gossip among the heterogeneously formulated guests. Her ex-lover is a middle aged Tory politician by the name of Geoffrey Stonor, a candidate running for parliamentary elections. Stonor is depicted as a domineering individual and the small group of visitors, present at the house of Lady John, functions to shed light on both Miss L. and Stonor's characters and also to present differing views on important political events in Britain during the play's historical time.

Votes for Women renders the personal and political life of individuals interconnected as politics remain the core of conversations at Lady John's house. Miss Levering, a misogynist character by the name of Greatorex, a Liberal M.P. and the people present at the house discuss the present elections. In the first act of the play Miss. Levering does not have a definite opinion on political issues dealing with the right to vote even though other characters have clearly established views. The play portrays change in the political scene for women as inevitable and the impetus of the belief is a motivation for most of the on stage politicians to alter their activities. Stonor describes the political atmosphere as becoming more democratic and that political campaigns, according to Stoner, have become an American experience where, "the American, you

know, he 'runs' for Congress. By and by we shall all be flying after the thing we want" (40). The general mood among politicians in the play is a fear of democratic change and Stonor as an experienced and shrewd elected official realizes from previous knowledge the role of women in election campaigns. The play highlights Stonor's apprehension of allowing a large minority involved in the political process. However, Stonor is unaware that a profound transformation in the political scene is already taking place and is coming from the historically important event of women taking bold political standpoints such as the physical revolt in the Parliament exemplifies.

The people gathered at the house of Lady John discuss the action and the media coverage of the militant women who stormed the Parliament because of the implicitly rejected vote bill. The allusion to the real event helps to solidify the conviction that being aggressive does initiate change and in history women became more militant after the 1890's and were effective in drawing the media and the public to the neglected demands of earlier petitions submitted by women. The aggressiveness of the section known as the Women's Social and Political Union helped raise awareness to the suffrage cause (Purvis 135).

In the play, Stonor describes the ladies as disorderly and Greatorex unites by describing them as a "public nuisance." The other characters, who are less experienced politically, join in the conversation and have a range of opinions. Mrs. Freddy, a traditional woman and a supporter of the vote, holds the belief that a victory was almost achieved in the Parliament if it had not been for the violence initiated by the women. Mrs. Freddy's husband retorts that he was against his wife's involvement and warned her of women's inability at taking "any coherent thinking or concerted action" (49). This public event, however, encouraged Miss. L. to realize the positive consequences of being aggressive since petitioning to the Parliament was only a deception practiced by both sexes. Miss L. reveals shrewdness as she incites her listeners to observe the political scheme apparent to the women who sat quietly ten minutes before closing time and became aware of men happily investing in "their old game" and thus were left with the option of acting violently (50). In a self-reflexive

moment, the acute observation of the plot administered by men guided Miss L.'s belief that the militant women have made more influence on Parliament and on the world than others who have spent forty years petitioning (52). Robins' characterization of Vida Levering is remarkable because even though Miss L. in the first act seems outspoken, spectators notice her withdrawal from taking a more active role until later on the play. Moreover, her actions are regarded with suspicion and prompts controversy among the onstage audience because she seems reluctant to embrace the ineluctable change of a society embracing a new beginning demolishing the inequalities in resources and opening new venues for women.

However, the delay in Miss L.'s transformation is to impart to the audience that the decision to become more politically active as a well-thought one and not as an impulsive and irrational behavior customarily allotted to women as earlier suggested by Mr. Freddy. Therefore, Robins shows the soundness of Miss L.'s wise decision to combat coercion by taking meaningful steps and Vida adjusts her personal conflicts to attain higher goals. Moreover, the playwright wanted the private discussions in the house of Lady John to be a preliminary debate with the uncertainty of a future which is about to unfold a revolution of a pace and extant in front of a larger audience.

Robins chooses to enlighten both Miss L. and the spectators on the importance of public involvement of women in order to gain a political role gradually. The second act, set in Trafalgar Square, provides the play with its impetus because some of the characters become spectators watching the rally. Henry James in his correspondence with Elizabeth Robins' comments on the play's influential reception, especially the impact of the second act, in a letter addressed to her on May 1, 1907. Even though James was not able to be present during the theatrical performance, he detected that the play was able to move the audience "powerfully" and it made him "squirm with regret" for not attending it (269). The public rally involves people from different backgrounds and a banner, supported by two people with the stage directions indicating, "If practicable only the lower portion of the banner need be seen, bearing the final words of the legend 'VOTES FOR WOMEN'" (61) appears to emphasize the

theme. There are also multiple speakers at the public meeting who were enthusiastic, but their voices were drowned by the uproar of the crowd. Robins uses the pandemonium of loud protestations to show the fundamental aversion people hold when it comes to political change and in staging people from various social backgrounds, Robins sought to give a more realistic portrayal of expected social prejudices.

The play portrays the struggle of women in society as requiring serious political attention. The Working woman's speech who builds an argument on the social and economical benefits of giving more political rights appeals to the audience's reasoning faculties. The ambiguities of moral theories are not present and instead she proposes practical reasons for equality. People are asked to regard the fairness and sensibility of women managing finances of the home and at the same time are not being allowed to contribute on a larger scale. The group of young men and women on stage listen but the men are noisy. The next presenter in the rally is Ernestine Blunt, a young Suffragist who also reminds the audience of the impossibility of women achieving any political goals by quietly petitioning to an uninterested group in their cause. She recounts the historical facts when the petition was first offered to the Parliament by John Stuart Mill in 1866 and of the more recent pleas presented in 1905. Blunt states that women are seeking the example of the suffrage of men and both movements are based on a shared human belief in the idea of combating inequality. However, Blunt did not gain the approval of the on-stage audience because they continually jeered and interrupted her speech and were cynical about democracy as involving women in the process. The frequent disturbance on stage shows the disillusionment that women have of acquiring rights the peaceful way in the presence of persistent rejection exhibited on stage. The chaotic sounds coming from the general public present in the scene is functional because it shows that the conflict is not mediated, arbitrated, or initiated by the political systems. On the contrary, the social presence of people from different backgrounds indicates a great deal of coercion as coming from historically rooted social views. Therefore, Robins is suggesting that the nature of the encounter

would require the imposition of a minority's demands on a largely unremitting majority who is clearly not in favor of any alteration in their political system.

Robins intended her play to be realistic in its portrayal of laughter and prejudices at suggestions of political reform. The real life characters emerge on stage to combat prejudices by presenting logical arguments and the enthusiasts shed light on the lame reasons lurking behind denial of political rights. The speeches of the presenters at the rally are provocative. Mr. P., for example, declares a proposed Suffrage Bill that includes a statement reserving to each respectable man "the power to prevent the Franchise being given to the female members of his family on his public declaration of their lack of sufficient intelligence to entitle them to vote" (83). The speech proved to be successful because Stonor, his fiancée and her chaperone were squirming after the utterance of such a pronounced suggestion.

Miss L., or Vida, who was in the exposition as a bystander, observant of the social and political assembly later decides to become a participator in the rally. From the onset Vida appeals to the ethos and pathos of the audience by focusing on the hypocritical concept of chivalry which she believes is the major obstacle in achieving justice and political reform. At first, Vida appeared hesitant and the Chairman introduced her as someone unaccustomed to speaking in public, which impelled the crowd to listen. She cites, as an example, the London County Council's refusal to help homeless women based on the idea that "if these cheap and decent houses were opened, they said, the homeless women in the streets would make use of them ..." (89). Later, she follows by a condemnation of acts committed against women in the name of chivalry.

Miss L. molded after realistic female reformers of the time was in the second act challenging the audience's hypocritical notions of "justice and chivalry" imposed often by the social code to prevent women from involvement in public life. The long speech at the rally is intended to produce an effect by resorting to all rhetorical appeals to gain acceptance in supporting women's political rights. Her argument shows the hypocrisy of a justice system that announces fairness without applying it equally to all members. Moreover, the statement is intended to extort sympathy from the audience:

Miss L. [Signing to him "It's all right."] Men Make boast that an English citizen is tried by his Peers. What woman is tried by hers?

[A somber passion strengthens her voice and hurries her on.]

A woman is arrested by a man, brought before a man judge, tried by a jury of men, condemned by men, taken to prison by a man, and by a man she's hanged! Where in all this were *her* "peers"? Why did men so long ago insist on trial by "a jury of their "peers"? So that justice should not miscarry-wasn't it? A man's peers would best understand his circumstances, his temptation, the degree of his guilt. Yet there's no such unlikeness between different classes of men as exists between man and woman. What man has the knowledge that makes him a fit judge of woman's deeds at that time of anguish-that hour-[lowers her voice and bends over the crowd.]- that hour that some woman struggles through to put each man here into the world (91)

Her projections of worldly injustices, as Jean noticed, left an impact on all the other characters including Stonor. In the middle of her speech, Miss L. tried to reach out physically to the crowd by her arm movements as if to seek support for extending the ideas of justice to women. The stage directions also emphasize that in one last effort to address the crowd, Vida was "silencing the general murmur and holding the people by the sudden concentration of passion in her face" (93). The power comes from the emotional and logical argument that speeds up the events of the play and a profound transformation occurs in Miss L. who ends up negotiating a deal with her ex-lover who might have a future as a member of the Parliament. The conversion of Miss L. is more than a personal one and could be described as expansive in its tendency to include all reluctant women in the act of self liberation. The interrogations of social beliefs and values in the second act would prompt spectators to investigate areas pertaining to women issues. The play also illuminates tendentially the growth of social injustice by rethinking relations of elitist self absorptions.

The play's third act indicates the inevitability of a transformation not only in Miss L., but in other characters. The setting takes place in the drawing room of Jean Dunbarton in the evening of the same day and Stonor is informed by Farnborough to keep in course with "these democratic days" (97). Farnborough encourages Stonor to take the advice of his brother Lord Windlesham who thinks defeat is inevitable unless Stonor "can manufacture some political dynamite within the next few hours" (98). Stonor decides to act on his advice by accepting Miss L.'s proposal to support women in the third act and become a "Friend to Women" (110). The suggestion seems ironic and the whole project seems to be a political stunt by Stonor. Nevertheless, Vida Levering and Robins accept the stagnant political status quo at this point because both believed that the first step is the psychological transformation in women and therefore; it is the emphasis on the personal conversion of the female characters of play as central in initiating an improvement in the social conditions of women.

Robins' purpose in presenting Vida Levering's gradual conversion is to emphasize her as a model for women to be emulated in her time and as an inspiration for future generations of female advocates. Jean Dunbarton decides to follow in her footsteps, and even though Lady John condemns Miss L.'s actions comes to appreciate Miss L.'s progress as the only option left to women. At the end of the rally, speeches, which covered all aspects in advocating the need for more reform, lead to one conclusion. Miss L. becomes convinced and demands that women should become more politically involved if they were to achieve the intended results. Her decision resonates even with the generation of women who also sense the ironic iteration of being sanctimonious when historical knowledge and logic point out the inevitability of being more politically involved as a practical approach in helping women.

Robins' insistence on political involvement inspired her to present a new type of drama for her generation and for future advocates of reformers. Even though the play's heavily imbued political content and zeal for a profound transformation in society prevented *Votes for Women* from being a commercial success, it remains an important contribution to feminist drama. Elizabeth Robins believed that a playwright's literary

output should not follow common standards of being apolitical. Instead, *Votes for Women* demonstrates "the feminist maxim 'the personal is political'" and the characters in her plays and novels validate her claims. Elizabeth Robins in *Votes for Women* emphasized the "militant" protagonist, a frowned upon derogatory label, as the only option left to women. Members of the audience are compelled to see through her own conversion the importance of giving rights for women. The play from the very beginning shows charity as insufficient in improving the social conditions of women. The domestic drama demonstrates the interconnectedness of the personal and political life because women have come to the realization the imperative vote bill as the answer for social problems. Moreover, the play sheds light on the importance of public involvement of women in political roles. The rally, being the most political part of the play, also functions as place of exposing the hypocritical concept of chivalry and justice, which prevents women from gaining their rights and society from getting rid of its social ills. In conclusion, Robins clarifies to her audience and the spectators in the play the inevitability of change in the political scene for women. Miss L. emerges as an example to be followed by the younger generation of women in society because the personal is interconnected with the political and therefore, a futuristic transformation is emphasized as inevitable.

No doubt Elizabeth Robins had anticipated a dramatic alteration in the influence of political relations in the English political system at the turn of the twentieth century; however, she was aware that the task of a playwright is to initiate a change by providing characters who because of their endowments and experience are driven by circumstances to become a link in the chain of power in society.

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