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Two Trans-Atlantic Divorce Novels: In *Camilla,* Elizabeth Robins counters Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*

Presentation for SAMLA 87 in Durham NC
Edith Wharton Society Panel
November 14, 2015

Original Title of Presentation:
Undressing Undine Spragg: In *Camilla,* Elizabeth Robins Re-writes the Trans-Atlantic Divorcée as a Feminist who Renounces a Second Marriage Proposal

For the Edith Wharton Society Panel with the theme, Writing (of) Women's Bodies: Wharton and Early Twentieth Century Feminism

Elizabeth Robins recorded in her diary of 25 November 1913 that she had completed reading Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country.* Robins' own very next novel, *Camilla* suggests that she rebelled against Wharton's brilliant send-up of customs of American Divorce.

Wharton's Undine Spragg, just a little over a chapter into *Custom of the Country*, just after she has discarded several attempts to forge a letter in her mother's voice on too, too fancy "pigeon blood" paper, has dismissed her maid, "bolted her door" and "dragged the tall pier-glass forward." She "rummages for fan and gloves, [sweeps] to a seat before the mirror with the air of a lady arriving at an evening party." She is

repeating, under the glare of the electric light, the "same secret pantomime" she has perfected from childhood: "[G]liding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter. . . . Within a few days she would be enacting the scene she was now mimicking; and it amused her to see in advance just what impression she would produce" (Chapter 2, 14-15). Thus begins a sprawling narrative of Undine's self-presentation: manipulative, destructive, scandalous, yet in the hands of Wharton's calculations, appealingly sardonic, and, in my estimation, hardly feminist. We should not like nor approve of Undine, but she exposes the surfaces of false presentation that type Undine as desirous of climbing higher and higher as she discards one then another husband.

Robins chooses an earnest, passionate, sympathetic heroine, flawed in her lack of assertiveness--until her last dramatic departure from her husband-- also represented by the "sound of a shot bolt" (*Camilla* 501) securing shut the door to finally sever her life from her remarried husband whose second wife has abandoned him. At the beginning of that climactic scene, just four full pages from the end of Robins' novel which, I would argue, is purposefully designed to function as counterweight to Wharton's whimsical Undine, Camilla is about to re-connect with the fellow American she has divorced, Leroy Trenholm. She has turned away, at least for now, the Englishman to whom she has been engaged. She has looked in upon, even held, the child of her former husband Leroy and his second wife, both appalled that the girl looks like the husband grabbing mother, yet conscious of her own mother-instinct as she

remains childless. This, and a note from *his* father signed "Father," makes her wonder whether she can get through what she hopes might be a failed but necessary offer, to go back to Leroy and his child by another woman-- if it saves him. Camilla has:

> dined in her room, early, and dressed late. After the maid had gone down, Camilla, looking in the glass, saw with a start of memory, the figure in pearl grey. She had worn grey that Easter morning. [This is when Leroy had first locked eyes on her, she just barely out of school, where she learned from other girls to idolize him from a distance.] There was here even a *chou* [cream puff] of pink panne, to repeat the note of that other hour. She pulled the gown off, and took the first her hand fell on, something she could fasten for herself. As she finished putting it on she turned again to the glass. "I shall look like that when I am dead!"
>
> Well, roses for a first betrothal, not a second. And then it struck her that in her habit-like black gown, she had an air of the *religieuse* about to take the veil. Why not? She was making a double renunciation. First of Michael. Then of ~~what Ogden Marriott had called~~ the Secular Nun, who beckoned still to that sheltering solitude.
>
> All Camilla's life certain phrases, certain words, held a peculiar magic for her. Good Faith had been one. And now Renunciation. She must make it—not parade it. Leroy would hate this kind of gown. She began hurriedly to unfasten it. His voice—already! He'd hate waiting, more than the wearing of black. (*Camilla* 500)

Unlike Undine, whose back story remains untold until the third to the last chapter (while mere hints of it cause her first legitimate husband to kill himself), Camilla

undertakes one long reflective flashback on her early life with Leroy Trenholme, as she crosses the Atlantic, east to west, having been proposed to by a deeply caring and comforting Englishman. The entire Part One, "Camilla in England" is a lush and luxurious slow-moving love story in which a landed English family is endeared to her, although at first they presume she is widowed, not divorced. (Her answer is that she can wear black for her father, can she not? And even this seems to ironically comment on Wharton's Undine finding out --on the last page of her novel--that in English society, an ambassador's wife cannot have been divorced.) Camilla accepts a proposal from Michael Nancarrow. Festivities are announced. A small sand burr falls out of a scarf when she is all set to commit to her second marriage. Driven by this physical reminder, she begs for a delay in the arrangements, in order to re-connect to the Florida soil of her youth. On board the ship, she vividly relives the unraveling of her first marriage. Part Two is simply "America," and re-begins a further back narrative, Part One now understood as having begun *in media res*.

One of Part Two's sharp climaxes is the scene of nightmarish insight in which her husband, having openly flirted with another, appears out of the darkness of an underground cave, having swum naked with a lighted torch in his mouth. Camilla, at least for now, and as a result of the climactic meeting with her remarried first husband, just after the dressing preparations described above, will reject a second bond in favor of a cherished and assertive solitude. Some would read cues to Camilla's rejection of her kind and loving Englishman as nun-like more than feminist. And there are even

hints of Camilla welcoming her English fiancé soon after the narrative ends. [See the addenda for text of a reader' letter, expecting a sequel.] Moreover, the mostly people-shy Camilla is given very important quiet strength that is in keeping with the feminist revisionism that Robins had crafted into *The Convert* and the political essay she wrote to accompany it, "Woman's Secret," of 1907.

Robins presents Camilla as a shy, late child of her parents (the third of three daughters) who was not supposed to live past childhood. She retreats into a shell of her silences, repeatedly. She does offer to "return" to Leroy out of obligation, knowing that the mother of his child, the husband- grabbing Linda, has since abandoned him. But when Leroy acknowledges he would let his second wife back into his affections, Camilla asserts that she can never be married in the way that deep in her soul she knows such a bond must be defined. (It's as if she is, Nora Helmer-like, caught between her dying and affectionate friend Dr. Rank and the husband she sacrificed for but hardly knew.) Robins did so conscious that she was probably defying the *Cosmopolitan* editor Edgar Sisson's promise of a secure place in his magazine for future work.

Both Wharton's and Robins' novels appeared first serialized in magazines. *Camilla* is lavishly illustrated by *Cosmopolitan* artist Alonzo Kimball. Wharton relied on *Scribner's* for the magazine and book contracts and, according to her biographers, had not completed the work when serialization began. The serialized version of Robins' novel restarts each section making sure the readers have its topic as subtitle: *Camilla: A*

Novel of Divorce. Close readers are quick to point out that Wharton's "Custom" of her title is not casual divorce *per se,* but the underlying conditions of American marriages that drive the male to make the money and separate his sphere from the female. Further examination of Wharton's structure in *The Custom of the Country* can show that Wharton's deft and satiric use of the flashback technique exposes how Undine's hasty--and hastily dissolved --first marriage, has flavored her entire social-climbing chilliness.

The brilliance of the novel to me is in its structure, that shortly after Ralph hears from Elmer Moffatt that indeed, he had hastily married and divorced Undine in their youth (thus explaining his under-the-table support for Ralph's firm), Ralph commits suicide. That makes it oh so convenient for Undine to marry her new beau, the landed French aristocrat. She had been in the process of trying to annul, not just divorce Ralph, for her new Frenchman's Catholic heritage would have not permitted him to marry the publicly once married Undine otherwise. So, <u>we</u> know, but it is not yet public information, that the Marquis Raymond de Chelles's marriage is tainted. It is only later, when Elmer Moffatt shows up to make an offer for the French husband's family heirloom tapestries, that we get just a taste of what a fling Undine had had with this reckless youngster from Apex who has risen in the world. Moffatt arrives newly restored to wealth (ostensibly to examine the tapestries). There are hints of Undine's unhappiness with her European aristocrat. Only then are we treated to the chronologically first of her romantic episodes. Undine indeed has had a wild two weeks of teenage marriage with Moffat that both sets of parents had immediately put a stop

to, once the eloping couple were tracked down. Thus, Wharton withholds until the forty-third of forty-six chapters the prime and originating relationship so that Undine's return to Moffat is as natural and pre-ordained as if Undine herself had plotted it out. Moreover, she makes the young couple's little scandal achieve a sort of nostalgic perfection in its flashback quality. "Undine's estimate of people," Wharton tells us, "had always been based on their apparent power of getting what they wanted--provided it came under the category of things she understood wanting" (Chapter 43, page 347). Undine revisits in her mind how Moffatt's earliest admission of his failure had taught her about his capacity to rebound. It is not long before he's the solution to her current dilemma, not only telling her that if she wants him it has to be "not slink[ing] through the back way . . . but walking in by the front door, with your head up, and your Main Street look (Chapter 43, page 359). Wharton's pattern of presenting Undine is to graze the surface, even as she makes the anti-heroine utterly self-conscious of her appearances. Robins, I would argue, is in touch with a much deeper sensibility of female self.

One key undressing scene is that done by Undine's father. Undine is flagrantly living apart from Ralph when her father more or less undresses her. She's had her little adulterous fling with the playboy husband of Ralph's cousin Peter Van Degan. He has earlier gifted her a handsome pearl necklace; but, shocked that she has so little regard for the health of her husband, Paul does not see their fling developing further. Undine,

to publicly announce she is on the rebound from this, forces her father to accompany her to the opera. In Chapter 26, upon their return, father Spragg follows her upstairs:

> She had dropped her cloak and stood before the wardrobe mirror studying her reflection when he came up behind her and she saw that he was looking at it too.
>
> "Where did that necklace come from?"
>
> Undine's neck grew pink under the shining circlet. It was the first time since her return to New York that she had put on a low dress and thus uncovered the string of pearls she always wore. She made no answer, and Mr. Spragg continued: "Did your husband give them to you?"
>
> *"Ralph!"* She could not restrain a laugh. (Chapter 26; 234)

Ordering his daughter to return her pearls is the closest Mr. Spragg will get to any control over his arrogant, avaricious child. (And of course, she sells them, instead.) This scene, and poor Ralph Marvell's views from outside Undine's consciousness are the closest Wharton ever gets to undressing Undine. [See the paragraph Hermione Lee devotes to the "dark fairy tale" quality of Undine in Lee page 435.] Deftly, Wharton makes the Masseuse also the manipulator of public record; she is not intimate enough with her charge as to ever minister her profession, yet is conveniently "there" to gossip about the newspaper reports in which Undine appears. It takes the confidence of Indiana Rollover to explain to her Paul's cool distance with "Men have feelings too--even when they're carried away by passion" (*Custom* chapter 24, 226).

Indeed, biographers have acknowledged that Wharton could put no passion into a novel conceived as a parable of gilded-age excess and fed by stories--as Shari Benstock has pointed out-- that Teddy Wharton told her, having interrupted the completion of it with several enterprises that were more at the heart of her developing craft and secret passionate self, beyond her own divorce (Benstock, *No Gifts* 187).

Much of the biographical facts of years leading up to Wharton's divorce (years that coincided with her conception of the book through its interruption and final completion) have been covered by her biographers, and *The Custom of the Country* has received much more notice in recent years. (The novel was the centerpiece of Jonathan Franzen's commemoration of her 150th year, in a 2012 *New Yorker* article. Also in 2012, both writers 150th, Hermione Lee delivered a lecture featuring the book, and Julian Fellows declares it is his favorite.)

The superficial Undine seems to be constantly dressing or undressing. She must be in Paris to be fitted for the latest gowns. Wharton makes Undine particularly unattractive when she resents her pregnancy because now the new gowns will have been wasted. When Wharton needs to shift to describe the closest a man gets to her, she is often describing it sympathetic to and from the male point of view. The tactic is quite admirable, for instance as Ralph, in his new-wedded bliss, contemplates the blue sky on his honeymoon. (Book Two, Chapter 11, page 87 ff.).

By contrast, Elizabeth Robins gives us a Camilla so intimate that ordinary touch becomes eroticized and the soft-spoken self-consciousness of the speech acts of her heroine can feel at one with her new fiancé when she takes initiative to embrace him. At the center of her flashbacks of the first marriage, we are in bed with Camilla and Leroy as she provides some solace to his PTSD- like hallucinations of Cuban battlefields, attributed to the fever he contracted, fighting with the Rough Riders:

> [E]ven after he'd struggled awake, he couldn't shake off the— whatever it was. A perfectly irrational horror. He hadn't an idea of what. But he'd lie in the grip of it and shiver and sweat. She must always wake him.
>
> Oh, she would! She'd always be there to guard him against that.
>
> There was pride, a sense of responsibility, in the new tenderness she felt for him. Oh, yes! she loved him more for his vague trouble's sake. (*Camilla* 329)

When it happens later, they are sleeping in adjacent rooms, the marriage more frayed. But the physical closeness is primacy for Camilla and the female voice writing her story. She's rushed to his side when she hears his moaning, "that old sound":

> She bent over and undid the top button of his sleeping jacket. She turned it away from his throat and released the splendid column of his neck. It gleamed white as porcelain. In the electric light it showed the same hard sheen as porcelain, that look of polish. . . . A wonderful piece of beauty was a human being at his best! (*Camilla* 350)

Then the voice of the novelist (and, no doubt of the feminist theorist) interrupts:

> Curious how little the stories made of the beauty of men. Was that because when men wrote they were aware more of the beauty of women? And when women wrote, they perhaps thought it indelicate to dwell on the physical side of men's attractiveness. (*Camilla* 350)

Moreover, Robins graphs out particularly nightmarish images of undress when she gets to the heart of Camilla's recognition that her marriage is over. Not only does Roy emerge from an underground Cave swimming naked with a torch in his mouth, Robins causes Camilla to recollect a horrific nightmare from childhood at a point when she imagines Roy and his new lover slipping away to be alone together. The horror of an attack centers around Camilla's fears of dark forces in the Florida woodlands.

Robins employs, within her long and almost continuous flashback section, a further-back recollection that emotionally connects what she knows is happening now (her husband's liaison with Linda) to a trauma from childhood. Conscious that a nighttime hunt for a rattlesnake is also a convenience for her husband to betray their marriage, she nevertheless worries that her husband will be unsafe in the woods. Two horrors merge as she remembers:

> Again and again Camilla saw the thing happening as she'd seen it once when a child. Eight, ten, twelve feet long at most, but endless-seeming. A miracle of motion among fallen leaves, wearing all leaf shades in flecks upon his back, except where the great black diamonds were stamped with the precision of a die. The paralyzing quickness of that progress! Her old impression came back as vivid as present vision. The great serpent *flowed* along the forest floor--yes, as if he'd been some swiftest runnel of

> sunflecked water--flowed past the rooted child, flowed on till he met with the obstacle. Uncle Pax. The whites of Paxton's eyes shining, his lips drawn back, his bared teeth shining, horror on his face and hate and terror, till the human face was more unnerving than the rattlesnake. In Paxton's upraised hands a fence rail falling like a flail upon all that writhing and rattling. And Camilla crying out: "Don't! *don't* beat him anymore!" And Paxton going on with a kind of horrible glee as if he couldn't stop.
>
> And when at last the miracle of motion was battered into stillness, and Paxton could think about the child, he told her how he'd seen the rattler coiled round a young heifer, crushing it to death. That picture was replaced tonight by one of Roy and Linda. Drawn close together, squeezed to death, in a scaly embrace. (*Camilla* 433)

Robins, also an American ex-patriot born in 1862, also a friend of Henry James, would look back at Wharton's accomplishments and make three additional very distinct observations on Wharton as writer. She praised Wharton's *Glimpses of the Moon,* and then confided how flattered she was to have Wharton's publisher Appleton want to use her remarks as a blurb to promote Wharton's book: "My opinion of her powers," she annotated the Publisher's request (qtd. in Gates 250). Then, in her *Ancilla's Share: A Study of Sex Antagonism*, (1924), she devotes a just over a single page (90-91) to the accomplishments of Wharton, determining that she achieved a near greatness artistically within her confines of studying the lives of those too well off to not consider themselves privileged. Finally, Robins reacted to *A Backward Glance* with a determination of her own: to write her autobiography without randomizing and

selecting small tidbits. That strong reaction that she was not going to hop, skip and jump over the years in which she meticulously documented her achievements may have doomed Robins as writer who continues to gain attention. The fact that Robins left the key parts of her autobiography unpublished, only seeing *Both Sides of the Curtain* into print (focusing only upon that earliest part of her acting career in London, before she secured rights to her first performances of Ibsen), has perhaps relegated her to second-tier status among feminist scholars reclaiming women writers important in their times.

Robins could admire the very pointed satire that Wharton sprinkled through *The Custom of the Country* and *Glimpses of the Moon,* especially. She likely saw Wharton's cleverly arranged satire more akin to her own earliest novel, *George Mandeville's Husband¸* written under her pseudonym C. E. Raimond in 1894. "George" abandons her family when the adaptation of her novel draws her like a magnet to total immersion in back stage producing. Several short works of fiction based on stage personalities and types also satirized the profession in which Robins had to negotiate her position. Most remain unpublished. After she saw that the actor manager system limited her freedom to perform in Independent Matinees (and, with the excitement generated by attention to Ibsen's plays and other experimental theatre), she consciously sought a clause in her contract allowing for her freedom not to be owned exclusively by a company. This arrangement was what Henry James admired in her when she got the chance to step into the role of Claire de Centré in his adaptation of *The American.* It was a role that rescued Robins and cemented the James-Robins friendship. As she points out in her

collection of his letters, *Theatre and Friendship,* however, she admits she was not going to share her early efforts at fiction with James. Again, this self-assessment in print belies what the records show are closer communications between James and Robins, where James assisted and gave Robins advice on her writing projects.

Neither Robins nor Wharton were far from imitating their "Master": *The Convert,* expanded and novelized from Robins' timely Court Theatre play of 1907 *(Votes for Women)*, might read like a feminist rewrite of *The Bostonians.* Wharton's *Glimpses of the Moon* is the comically explosive *Wings of the Dove*. James had wrought his tragedy out of the deception which two intimate lovers play on their one rich benefactor, Millie Theale. Once she leaves her fortune for them, the legacy is so tainted that any consummation of their affair (only in the filmed version!) is also its ending. Wharton has her loving couple plot multiple ways to exploit their richer friends--as if to say to James, "I can turn your one shard of colored cut glass into a kaleidoscope of fun." The newlyweds admit to each other before it begins that they will be aware their schemes have a limited shelf life. Just as each is sure the other has forsaken the pact for a more monetarily comfortable partnering, each feels magnetically draw to the other. In its brilliantly crafted denouement, Wharton allows the couple to rescue each other, despite the woman's duty of babysitting someone else's brood of young children. No wonder it has been recently remade as a Jazz-Age stage musical. (And the brood of youngsters neatly foreshadows what Wharton will make of a string of children needing some chaperoning in a next novel, *The Children*.) Even the success of the man of the couple

selling a story inverts the tragic life of Ralph, poet, writer, unsuccessful at his deep observations of his own civilization crumbling as he schemes a way to set it down.

Robins had her satiric period, as well. Yet in the long arc of her fiction, she would get more at the heart at some of the same themes and feminist awakenings of Wharton, including fears of hereditary weaknesses, sacrificing of personal happiness for the sake of private integrity, and a commitment to aid the Allies effort in Europe during the first World War. Robins' very next novel after *Camilla* would lobby for the U.S. to come to the aid of Britain. She, like Wharton, mostly abandoned large literary projects during the war in order to aid wounded soldiers and participate in relief efforts more directly. Yet *The Messenger*, composed during the months the US aided the allies war effort, 1917-1918, was likely partially inspired by James's giving up his U.S. citizenship as protest to the administration's neutrality. (Robins was traveling on the ship that landed in New York to announce to young Harry James the death of his uncle, and she appends to *Theatre and Friendship* the reprinted article she published in the *New York Times* in 1916, explaining that the Anglophile's view of Americans' hesitation to join the war effort might well have hastened James's death.)

Questions still persist in the fact that the two American women had shared a friendship with Henry James. They seem not to have been in each other's spheres. Likely they never met. No doubt this can be attributed to Wharton's disgust at the political suffragists and her discomfort for women who lived with other women. Yet

each had business relations with Elisabeth Marbury. Each knew well enough Mrs. Humphrey Ward to correspond with frequency. Robins' last professional role was Alice in Ward's adaptation of her own novel, *Eleanor* in 1902; Hermione Lee documents the correspondence between Wharton and Ward when Ward's rented then grew restless at Ward's lavish home "Stocks" just as war broke out in Europe (Lee 466 ff.)

In 1933, Robins would commemorate James in *Theatre and Friendship*¸ Yet, writing in 1924, under the cover of anonymity, Robins exposed James for his male-centered evaluation of Wharton. In *Ancilla's Share,* a work that prefigures Virginia Woolf's two feminist essays-- and the book that Crystal Eastman described in 1925 as "rapidly becoming the feminist bible," Robins faulted James's belittling of Wharton's powers. Although not a detailed critique, Robins saw in the public persona of James's pronouncements the patriarchal tendency to think of Wharton foremost as female rather than applaud her as genuinely accomplished. Robins admits Wharton's sphere is one of "chosen limits," a world of the "privileged," but applauds her "exquisite use of the English tongue." She invites her audience to "thank the high gods for an artist who under restriction can give us creations of such ironic veracity, such wit, such poignancy of beauty" (*Ancilla's Share*, 91). It is Henry James, whom elsewhere Robins can appreciate, that this her anonymous voice will expose:

> She was, we gather, his valued friend. How he [James] valued her genius may best be appreciated by comparing what he says of this great ornament of

> letters with the tributes he offers to writers of his own sex not worthy to sit at Mrs. Wharton's feet. (91)

We have, contemporaneous to my preparation of this paper, a unique phenomenon. There have been mentions of both Wharton and Robins in the *Wall Street Journal* during these fall months of 2015. Wharton's mentions are in the Mansions and Travel sections. Henry James's and Wharton's reviews of the Biltmore in Ashville bracket the Vanderbilt excesses. Ann Ross, the wife of one couple who cannot even estimate the cost of restoring a Newport property, allows herself to boast of their accomplishments: "It's like stepping into my own little Edith Wharton novel." Robins gets recognized differently. Ben Zimmer, the language expert, earlier examined the derivation and alterations that the word "suffragette" underwent, as a sidebar to news of the release of the movie *Suffragette* in London. He credits a character in a 1907 Elizabeth Robins novel for welcoming the label originally meant as derogatory. ["Word on the Street: 'Suffragette': Insult Worn with Pride." *WSJ* October 17-18, 2015. C-4]: "In a 1907 novel about the suffrage movement by Elizabeth Robins, a Pankhurst associate, the main character proclaims, 'We accept the insult; We wear it proudly.'"

There is yet to come, I predict, a definitive analysis of how Henry James separately cultivated associations with Robins and Wharton as well as how they mined and embellished his iconic depictions of portraits of Americans whose destiny is to confront English and European associations. Nevertheless, if Wharton and Robins are

not each orbiting satellites of the admired Henry James, it is tempting to postulate Elizabeth Robins as the Third Triumvir of Trans-Atlantic American Fiction.

[End text of prepared paper.]

Addenda: Un Delivered Preface.

Two readers of *Camilla* weigh in:

As these incidents may have been recounted in an earlier Robins paper, one that covers the same ground as my discussion of the Robins novels in my biography, I add them here only as un-delivered preface:

Typical of Robins' plot strategy in other novels, *Camilla* sustained its suspense through its final, eventful chapters. One reader's frustration in her never obtaining the final installment of the serialized version is instructive. Mrs. Glen Dunlap, writing from St. Joseph Missouri, in October 1929, over ten full years after the novel was serialized, addressed Elizabeth Robins by her married name, Mrs. George Richmond Parks. "Dear Mrs. Parks," the letter began:

> Could you tell me where I can obtain a copy of your "Camilla"? I have been trying to get one for ten years. I have read all but the last

> installment of it fifty times. I never could find the Sept 1918 Cosmopolitan or the story in book form.
>
> I think it is the most beautiful book I have ever read and I am heartsick when I come (Fifty times) to the end of the next to the last installment and I can't know how it ended.
>
> I cut each portion out of the magazine and have worn them to shreds reading them, so I want the book before they are completely gone.
>
> Why can't Dodd, Mead & Co. reprint a few copies? It would be a fine book for these days and it is as new as it ever was. It will never be old. Please help me to know just what Camilla did.

If Robins sent her the book version, Mrs. Dunlap would likely have been disappointed, but that did not deter a different reader, disappointed in the inconclusive ending, from inserting her own request. Writing fresh from having read the *Cosmopolitan*'s September 1918 last segment, Mrs. W.I. Black wrote to Robins from Memphis Tennessee:

> I have read your book Camilla and think it is one of the best novels that I have ever read. I have been a great reader all my life. I don't like the way you ended it. I think you ought to write another story about Camilla and tell about her return to England and her marriage and her having a happy home and children she was such a lovely character. I have been a dreamer all my life and I would have been a writer if I had been educated. I have been making my own living since I was eleven years old and now I am forty-six mother of twelve children seven dead and five living.

> . . . My daughter who is 22 years old has written a good many poems and stories . . . [none] published . . . [I] hope you will not take offence of this letter.
>
> I hope to see another story of Camilla. Reading is the only pleasure in life.

[I found no evidence of Robins herself interested in continuing Camilla's story.]

BRIEF BIO:

Joanne E. Gates is Professor in English [now emerita] at Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville AL, from where she directs The Elizabeth Robins Web <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/index.html>. Her biography of Elizabeth Robins published in 1994 won the Elizabeth Agee Prize from the University of Alabama Press. She presented a paper on Robins as actress and playwright at the First Actresses symposium, Ohio State University (May 2014) and contributed an article on Robins to the special James and Women issue of the *Henry James Review:* "Henry James's Dictation Letter to Elizabeth Robins: 'The Suffragette Movement Hot from the Oven'." Volume 31 (2010), pp. 254–263.

Notes:

Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* appeared in *Scribner's Magazine*, Vols. 53 and 54, beginning with the January 1913 issue. The volumes are digitized by Google Books. Book editions appeared in 1913, and modern reprints are prolific. Elizabeth Klett records an audio version available at *librivox.org.*

Camilla by Elizabeth Robins was published in *Cosmopolitan*, beginning June 1918. Volume 65. Illustrations by Alonzo Kimball. Available at Google Books. The Book edition available at Google Books has a dedication dated May 1918 and frontispiece by C. Allan Gilbert.

I presented an earlier paper on *Camilla* and *The Messenger* in Chattanooga, 1991, but sections of it duplicate what is in my as-yet-unpublished biography.

Diaries and letters to Robins referenced here are from the Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, NYU.

Previously unpublished quotations from the Elizabeth Robins Papers, NYU Fales Library, are included here with the understanding that the current rights holder, Independent Age allows that "we grant rights free of charge for PhDs, dissertations and academic research/publications. Anything likely to generate substantial income - mass publishing and other media - we will charge for and will negotiate on a case by case basis."

Travel to the conference was funded in part by a Travel and Development Grant, JSU.

References to Robins, Wharton and James mentioned in *Wall Street Journal* 2015 are as follows.

Unfavorable review by James on the Biltmore cites his letter to Edith Wharton:

Taylor, Candace. "MANSION --- the New Newport --- Vacationing Millionaires and History-Loving House Hunters are Restoring Gilded Age Mansions in the Seaside Rhode Island Enclave." *Wall Street Journal*, 23 Oct. 2015, p M1. *ProQuest*, http://lib-proxy.jsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mansion-new-newport-vacationing-millionaires/docview/1725337774/se-2.

Alice Ross, owner with her husband of Newport's Berkeley House, described her complete renovation as akin to stepping into an Edith Wharton novel in:

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The archived version at ProQuest does not include my comment, clarifying that the title of the Robins novel is *The Convert.*

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