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Autobiographical Elements in Elizabeth Robins' Review of Sarah Bernhardt's Hamlet

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Paper for Hofstra University's Women in Theatre Conference, "On the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Sarah Bernhardt 1844-1923."
Hempstead, New York (October 6, 1994).

[Notes: Since the presentation of this paper, the Elizabeth Robins Web offers the online text of Robins' review of Bernhardt in *Hamlet.* "On Seeing Madame Bernhardt's *Hamlet*" by Elizabeth Robins was published in *North American Review*, 171 (December 1900), pp. 908-919. Modern printing with my introduction is in *A Groat's Worth of Wit,* vol. 11, no. 4, 2000, pp. 37-45. On agreement with the editors, my edited web version remains at the Robins Web, https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/docshort/onseeham.html. Original printed format from the *North American Review* can be seen at https://archive.org/details/jstor-25105101/page/n1/mode/2up. The play by Theresa Rebeck, *Bernhardt / Hamlet*, opened at the Goodman Theatre in 2019 and is available through Samuel French. This paper was accepted for publication in the volume of the conference proceedings, but the anticipated

volume did not materialize. See end of text for bibliography and ER chronology links.]

The years that comprised the decade of the 1890s were a remarkable period for experimental theatre in London. They were ushered in as London still reeled from the impact of the stunning reality of Janet Achurch playing Nora in *A Doll's House* in 1899. They drew to a close with Sarah Bernhardt acting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in a French production at the Adelphi Theatre in 1889. For the American born actress, Elizabeth Robins, the decade was a long double experiment. First, Robins established herself as perhaps the most respected of realistic actresses with her performances of Ibsen--primarily for Hedda Gabler and Hilda Wangel in productions which she herself independently co- produced. In addition, she played Asta Allmers in *Little Eyolf*, Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Kristina Linde in *A Doll's House*, even Martha in *The Pillars of Society* and Agnes Brand in a performance of the fourth act of *Brand*. She passed over an opportunity to première Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*, and in her memoirs regretted her hesitancy. Secondly, Robins undertook an experiment of her own, carried out in secret at first, with the aid of a pseudonym. She became a writer of fiction, plays, and personal essays.

The only article Robins had published under her own name before 1899 was her 1890 *Universal Review* account of touring the United States with Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett. The essay was published as "Across America with the 'Junius Brutus Booth'"; she used in her title the name that Edwin Booth gave to their specially furbished Pullman car, after Booth's father. In 1900, the *North American Review*

published Elizabeth Robins' reaction to Sarah Bernhardt in *Hamlet*. Compared to the "travel-log" orientation of her earlier essay, in which Robins gives very little detail to explain the substance of Booth's acting, the second essay reveals details from Edmund Booth's *Hamlet*, which Robins so very vividly remembered because she had such direct contact with his performances. She does not explain her participation in Booth's productions in her Bernhardt review. Her reasons for dwelling on Booth for comparison are confined to two generalized remarks: She notes that "the old performance is vivid still from end to end, and the new one only here and there" (914). "We Americans," Robins explains to her readers,

> were long ago shown a Hamlet who taught us that, however high an ideal the imagination might conjure up, it yet might fall short of a great actor's power to body forth a noble sympathy with noble things. That Hamlet of ours, who being dead yet speaketh, is, half unconsciously to ourselves, still the standard by which we measure the acted play. Sitting in the Adelphi Theatre, I heard again the voice of Edwin Booth soaring out beyond Madame Bernhardt's, and filling the distances she made no attempt to sound. (910)

Yet Robins should not be dismissed as one of those critics who, like Max Beerbohm, simply ridiculed the performance. There are two important reasons why Robins' remarks about Bernhardt's *Hamlet* deserve some attention. First and foremost, Robins, with her method of comparison, is able to provide specifics about Bernhardt's technique at many key moments in the play. Because she develops detailed comparisons, her descriptions of Bernhardt's interpretations are not, for the most part,

duplicated elsewhere in published reviews. She confirms the general consensus about Bernhardt's power to excite, observing that the "most notable" of her "aptitudes" is "her wonderful mastery of sheer poise, that power she has of standing stock still for an indefinite length of time with perfect ease and grace, never shifting her ground, and equally never ceasing for a moment to be dramatic" (919). But her analysis by comparison with Booth goes much deeper that what Robins acknowledges as the "magnetism, the untranslatable fascination that Madame Bernhardt exercises over her public, in whatever part she chooses to appear" (919). Precisely because Robins breaks through this ability to mesmerize, and does so by pointing out the key moments that define her characterization of Hamlet, the essay is worth a careful study.

There is a second importance to Robins' review. I see the essay as an important landmark in Robins' transition between her 19th century position as performer and her twentieth century importance as novelist and feminist politician. Although the autobiographical elements of the review are "coded" and not directly articulated, the analysis of *Hamlet* provided Robins an opportunity to reflect upon the priority of theatre in her own life. In the Bernhardt essay, she took care *not* to mention that her memory of Booth in the role stemmed from her performances in his companies. Furthermore, Robins would later credit Booth's performance of Hamlet with having once restored faith in her own ability to act. This tribute appears in her thinly disguised autobiography of the stage, but Robins verifies the fictional incident in a subsequent memoir. On the surface, Robins reveals significant information about Edmund Booth's

Hamlet; by indirection, she credits the actor's heightened sense of tragedy for making a critical difference in her own life.

Robins, like Bernhardt, had validated her acting genius with the dramaturgy of a profoundly skilled playwright. (Critics were taken by Bernhardt's performance in Shakespeare largely because the vehicles in which she had made her fame were then recognized to be far inferior to the dramatic subtleties and brilliance she could achieve in a French translation of Shakespeare.) Yet for Robins, life as a leading Ibsen performer did not fully satiate her talent. Unlike Bernhardt who acted into her later years, Robins gave up her career on the stage in order to write and eventually to lobby for women's suffrage. Only recently have feminist critics begun to acknowledge the tripartite achievement of Robins as talented actress, intriguing novelist, and committed feminist theorist.

I am in somewhat of a unique position to explore just why Bernhardt's *Hamlet*, as she made use of it to re-explore her connection to Booth's performance, was so important as a turning point for the Ibsen actress. My biography of Robins (*Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist*, published by the University of Alabama Press), is organized around the double obligations of Robins' life. With this paper, I focus specifically upon the important transition from stage to world that Robins committed herself to and that Bernhardt could not.

One of Robins' tactics of analysis is to assume a certain naivety, when it comes to the cross-dressed role. She begins her essay with a caution: "For a woman to play

at being a man is, surely, a tremendous handicap in the attempt to produce stage illusion" (908). Later, in another attempt to suspend her doubt, she explains:

> I had no idea that I was about to be convinced that women cannot "do" men's parts. Indeed, I do not, while I am in the theatre, care two sous about scholarly distinctions. I want emotion; I admire good technique; but I have come first and foremost that my primitive love of the play may be ministered to. (910)

I have no doubt that some gender theorists could turn this statement into something it is not. After all, Robins' mother's distant cousin was connected by marriage to Charlotte Cushman's family [Wayman Crow's daughter Emma married Charlotte Cushman's nephew, but it now is commonly understood that the marriage was a cover for Emma Crow and Charlotte Cushman's lesbian relationship.] Cushman's lasting reputation, including her performance in male roles, made its presence felt in the legends that circulated among the acting companies during Robins' first years on the American stage. I find no evidence that she wrote of or recalled that she had performed Hamlet in the closet scene for a school exercise at Putnam Female Seminary, even though she saved news clippings of the performance. With her fellow Ibsen performer Marion Lea, Robins had had plans of playing Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Later she would flirt with, and spend long hours of research with, but never complete, her project to dramatize the saga of Loreta Janeta Velazquez, the Cuban-born cross-dresser who took the male persona of Harry Buford and fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. [PBS has aired the Documentary, *Rebel: Loreta Velazquez, secret soldier*

of the American Civil War / written and directed by Maria Agui Carter; produced by Maria Agui Carter, Calvin A. Lindsay Jr., 2013] Though for some it may be tempting, I have read too many of the private documents in Robins' archive to want to leap to apply modern gender theory to Robins' acting or to her female friendships. I think that for Robins, the cross-dressed female performer was less an issue in the politics of performance than it is for us today.

There are times during the Hamlet essay, however, when Robins seems not to dismiss but to accentuate the gender difference of performer and role. She very carefully constructs her sentences so that we notice her gendered pronouns. "Madame Bernhardt's Hamlet" is often the referent for the male "he," "his," "him," that follows in the sentence; and, though grammatical, this sometimes jars us into a super-awareness of Robins' observation that focus on the character. Then, suddenly we are made aware of the female design behind the maleness of the role: "His relish of his own oratory could not be more plainly marked than she does it, in that little burst of laughter as she frisks off the platform" (917).

For the most part, Robins develops her critique by demonstrating how Booth's approach heighted tragic empathy; Bernhardt, she maintained, contradicted so memorable a felt performance with her largely comic approach to the role. Repeatedly, Robins diminishes Bernhardt's performance with descriptors that belittle the youth and the light- heartedness with which Bernhardt distinguished her Hamlet: she "laughs with all the keen enjoyment of a child, at a moment which is fraught for Hamlet with the most tragic foreboding!" Her speech to the players is delivered as "a precocious

young gentleman, who fancies himself an actor, and thoroughly enjoys laying down the law to plodding 'professionals'" (917). Robins details the comic moments when Bernhardt's Hamlet teases Polonius, expanding "Shakespeare's laconic 'Buz-buz' into a prolonged piece of comic business, affecting to follow a fly about, which ultimately she pretends to catch, herself buzzing vigorously all through Polonius's speech" (914). Robins notes that an original piece of comic business with Polonius's body "is now wisely omitted" (918), perhaps confirming that she saw the performance more than once. She takes exception to the flippant way that Bernhardt handled the skull in the graveyard with an elaborate flourish of prose. I would claim that Robins' review at this point merits closer quotation, for it is useful in correcting the staid, serious, partly romantic-tragic stationary pose of Bernhardt with the skull, whose frequent reproduction has come to symbolize so much. "It was not pleasant to see the grinning object handled so callously," Robins begins, and then continues:

> What's the use of bringing in the ironic emblem of mortality if it is treated as lightly as a lap-dog? Indeed, I feel sure that Madame Bernhardt treats her lap-dog more considerately, for it would be strange if she made gestures with it as unconcernedly as she does with the skull. If my eyes did not deceive me, she tapped the grinning teeth with her finger; and she certainly is far from objecting as genuinely to the odor of mortality as Shakespeare makes Hamlet when he asks if Alexander "looked o' this fashion i' the earth, and smelt so? Pah!" Here the actor is expressly directed to "put down the skull," but Madame Bernhardt could not only endure to hold it without "Pah!" she seemed to forget what it was she had in those eloquent hands of hers, as she emphasized

> feelingly the lines on imperious Caesar by gesticulating with the skull of a former acquaintance. (918-9)

Robins is, of course, acutely aware of the legend of Bernhardt staging her flirtation with death in order to defy mortality. She comments that Bernhardt's delivery of "'Except my life, except my life, except my life,' was so entirely beautiful that one forgot for the moment that this Hamlet could never have meant it" (914). I think it unfortunate that we do not have Robins' description of Bernhardt's Hamlet's dueling and death scene, but I suspect that Robins was enough disaffected by the character by this point in the play that it made little difference.

Unlike other critics of Bernhardt in the role, Robins develops a measured reaction to the success of the role by focusing upon those moments that fall short of engaging us in Hamlet's dilemma. She elects, I think, to excuse the places where Bernhardt's comic business is appropriate, when, for instance, Hamlet corrects Polonius's recollection of the lines about Pyrrhus, and "very snubbily" snuffs out the old man with a comic emphasis; and the obedient laughter runs round the gallery" (914).

What Robins cannot excuse, are those places where Bernhardt violates her notions of Hamlet's mental anguish, a tone, she is convinced that is closer to the soul of Shakespeare's than any other character. At the climax of the re-enacted poisoning, when Bernhardt recognizes that the king's been caught, "with something a little reminiscent of an urchin swarming over an orchard wall, [her Hamlet] crawls up the

throne" and looks the King in the face with "eyes, not sombre and horror-stricken, but keen and glittering." Robins caps her objection of this moment with "This Hamlet actually bursts out into peal on peal of laughter. His clever trick has succeeded, his *Schadenfreude* overflows" (917).

Robins does not confine her contrasts between Booth's and Bernhardt's Hamlets to brief phrases that measure her disappointment against an expectation informed by Booth's gripping poignancy. In several extended passages, she carefully recreates a moment of Booth's performance in order to demonstrate Bernhardt's shortcomings. There is not time enough here for me to dwell on each individually; nevertheless, one or two "for instances" exemplify the detail in Robins' comparisons:

> Madame Bernhardt took the story of the apparition with less surprise than Booth. He stood during the scene, alert, keen to his finger tips, to listen to so strange a story. Madame Bernhardt sat and crossed her legs. (912)

Robins first created a rich portrait of the Booth that her American readers might have recollected or heard talked about:

> I remember how quick and sharp Booth's questions rang:
>
> "Armed, say you?"--"From top to toe?"--"What, look'd he frowningly?"--Pale or red?"--"And fixed his eyes upon you?" (912)

The thorough documentation of Booth's "keen questioning" (912), stressed that Booth was "profoundly moved." In contrast, Bernhardt's response to the report of the ghost

was "collected and critical": "She was more like a youthful Psychical Researcher, bent on employing scientific methods of investigation" (913).

Robins, with her precise memory of Booth's playing of his scene with Ophelia, is able to develop a much more careful objection than what she first conveys as her discomfort with Bernhardt's Hamlet in a romantic scene. She begins this section by explaining:

> Naturally, in the scene with Ophelia, more than in any other, the sense that Hamlet was not a man interfered with the illusion. Booth made you feel the lover in the lines, very softly spoken and with a new note of exquisite tenderness:
>
> "The Fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remembered." (916)

Robins here is not, in fact, interested in the discrepancy between female actor and male role, but in the genuineness of a dramatic situation that depends upon how well and how soon Hamlet suspects he is being spied upon. Again, she begins with the precision of Booth's playing of the scene in order to counterpoint it with Bernhardt's portrayal:

> If my memory serves me aright, he [Booth] was seized by suspicion of Polonius or some eavesdropper spying on them just before he replies to Ophelia's offer to give back "the remembrances." In a flash, he was on his guard and had given the audience a key to his assumed hardness and bitter raillery:
>
> "No, not I;

> I never gave you aught."
>
> He went on, talking really for the benefit of the listener behind the arras, piling up disappointment and perplexity for any one who had thought to spy upon him in a moment of unguarded tenderness.
>
> Booth made a magnificent piece of arraignment out of, "I am myself indifferent honest," rising on the words "very proud, revengeful, ambitious"; and, his scorn gathering momentum, he poured out in a torrent, "With more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in." A little breathless pause, and the contemptuous question: "What should such fellows as I do *crawling* between heaven and earth?" It occurs to me to wonder [Robins continues] if there has ever been any one who could give us the height of the heavens above the earth, as he did here, without even raising that glorious voice of his. Did any one, before or since, ever make meanness the reptile that he showed it, with his slight, dragging emphasis on "crawling"? (916)

There are good reasons why Robins rises to her heights of defense for Booth's playing in this scene, which I will examine in a moment. Bernhardt's scene with Ophelia she characterizes in this way:

> I could not see that Madame Bernhardt suspected the presence of Polonius till the question, "Where's your father?" She ends the scene (after a singular effect got out of hissing at Ophelia) with, "To a nunnery, go!" thereby cutting Ophelia and the audience out of the beautiful, "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown," etc. (916-7)

Even in this pointed contrast, Robins' original readers could not know the depths to which her own passions were touched by Booth's playing of the scene. A decade later, in 1910, Elizabeth Robins would develop her sharp memory of Booth's effectiveness in the scene by showing his impact upon a young woman who struggles to break into a career on the American stage during the 1880s. The character, Theodora, from Robins' unpublished novel, "Theodora: A Pilgrimage," is so closely autobiographical that, even if there were not outside confirmation (and there is), we would have to assume that Theodora's impressions mirror those of Elizabeth Robins. Just when the discouraged Theodora is ready to give up hope of ever being given a chance--when she is alone, in a poorly furnished attic room in a cold New York City boarding house--she has the opportunity to attend Booth's *Hamlet* in exchange for volunteering to post bills announcing the performance. These "Bill Posters' Seats" in the highest gallery are all she can afford. But the event marks a turning point in the girl's self-confidence. She is so mesmerized by Booth's performance that she comes back to her room and, with newfound reaches of emotional energy, "begins whispering the 'Ophelia.'" As she recites the Ophelia soliloquy, she feels a thrill of excitement because her voice is charged with a note of urgency that it never had before. The more she listens the more moved and taken aback she is. Finally, she traces the singing echo of her own voice to the metal curtain rod and discovers that her impassioned recitation has set it vibrating. "An echo out of brass!" she exclaims, laughing at the discovery, yet moved to epiphany because, after weeks of formal lessons and no measurable progress, she understands that her voice does have

dramatic power. [Citations in this paragraph are from the unpublished "Theodora: A Pilgrimage (ER Papers, Fales), discussed in my biography. pp. 190-4.]

We know the moment was real for Robins, for she writes in a late autobiographical fragment of the brass curtain rod of enlightenment. She was moved, over and over again by Booth, not simply for his Hamlet's power, but because she saw in Booth the man a sense of the tragic understanding of life. She connected the mental instability of his family with her own experience. (Her mother was confined to an institution just after Elizabeth began to perform, and her husband, fellow actor George Parks, committed suicide before Robins could save their financial situation by arranging to tour with Booth and Barrett's company.) On that tour, in 1887-8, Robins was a minor actor with higher aspirations. She had the occasion to slip into the audience to watch Booth, and also spent a good deal of her free time annotating Shakespeare texts. She kept a careful diary, mostly full of anecdotal information. On one occasion she noted, "Mad scene breaks me down." Booth and Barrett were most successful playing opposite each other in *Othello*, in which Robins was not cast. When the company was forced to economize, Elizabeth Robins was dismissed. Although it was a profound disappointment at the time, the next phase of her acting career was soon to begin.

Framed between Elizabeth Robins' 1890 and 1900 essays which featured Booth's performances as a central inspiration, Robins contributed to nothing short of a revolution in modern drama. She also, from direct experience, grew so to mistrust the misogyny apparent in stage management that she began to develop her writer's voice.

Under a carefully guarded pseudonym with a presumably male perspective, C. E. Raimond, she published three novels and a collection of stories. She collaborated with Archer on one play, "The Mirkwater," and with Florence Bell on the dramatization of *Alan's Wife*. She wrote a searing tragedy of marital strife, *The Silver Lotus* and several satiric stories of stage life. [These, along with an unfinished novella, "The Coming Woman," which includes a fictionalize profile of her fellow actor, Mrs. Patrick (Stella) Campbell, remain unpublished. See further comment, below.]

Most of Robins' lasting impact today rests upon the impression made by her portrayal of Ibsen's women. Yet simultaneous with her acting career, she developed this second, strong voice as a writer of fiction. She translated literature from the Norwegian and, assisted by the promise of liberal royalties from publisher William Heinemann (who wanted to marry her and whom she refused), she earned some money to support herself. Her awareness of the position of women on the stage is made most acute in her 1892 novella, "The Coming Woman," in which a leading British playwright searches for a performer with the talent of a younger Sarah Bernhardt. Even though this work is a key to understanding both her relationship to the theatre and her emerging feminism, it is clear from her personal writings that Robins was more partial to Eleanora Duse as the age's female icon of the stage. Robins, like others, admired Bernhardt's technique and daring; but, as she makes clear in her review of *Hamlet*, the clever tricks of the French actress fell far short of a convincing portrait of a psyche.

I am convinced that the opportunity to study and analyze Bernhardt helped Robins evaluate her own commitment to the stage. 1899, the year of Bernhardt's production, and 1900, the year her review was published, were marked by a good deal of soul-searching. Her 1898 novel, *The Open Question*, had created a sensation; but its publication also revealed her identity. (She had hoped that her pseudonym could establish her reputation apart from "Ibsenism" with which she was so strongly identified.) Bibliographers of Robins' career might suspect that the disclosure stifled her voice, for she published no full-length works until 1904. In fact, Robins was doubly productive; she wrote a play that she optioned to Beerbohm Tree for a year, "Benvenuto Cellini;" and she completed two novellas that were accepted for publication.

On the last day of the century, she wrote an extended passage in her "year-end" diary that expressed her great disappointment over Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. "Wreckage on a giant scale," she called the play, commenting that the ten years she had invested in the great mission to interpret Ibsen now felt wasted. Interest in other opportunities for stage productions waned, even with her position as the leading artistic impetus behind the New Century Theatre. She had a vision for a collaborative theatre but did not want the NCT to be seen primarily as a vehicle for her talents.

Most importantly, Robins undertook a long voyage as the physical manifestation of an inner search. In the summer of 1900, she traveled to Nome, Alaska, recorded the daily life of the newest gold fields for six weeks, then documented her steamer trip

up the entire length of the Yukon River. Ostensibly, she went there to reconnect with two brothers who had departed San Francisco in 1898 in search of Klondike gold and from whom she had received only spare reports. Her deeper personal mission was to test her ability to use her connection with the real world as a source for her next fiction.

In a side trip from her Nome and Yukon River excursion, at a point northern-most in her Alaska and Klondike journey, she was captured in a photo, taken by an acquaintance using her camera, sitting posed with a skull. "Mrs. Yorrick," she labeled it, when she pasted the snapshot in her scrapbook. What did she mean? That the skull might be Mrs. Yorick's--in a production that allowed her to be Ms. Hamlet without the "trappings" of a culture that needed their Hamlets in doublet and hose? That she--*her former self*--was the dead jester's dead wife? That flirting with mortality is not just a performer's idle fancy, able to be scanned into Shakespeare's eloquent prose? To me, the photo captures Elizabeth Robins alive to the possibilities beyond the stage. No play could hold the human dramas she witnessed in Alaska. No role would again captivate Robins' acting sensibility. The artifice of Bernhardt's theatre was all the more ridiculous. She would not be ensnared in the cage of an actress who was at the mercy of a theatre that trivialized tragic drama.

Published in ***Alaska Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900***, p. 159
Credit: Fales Library at NYU, Elizabeth Robins Papers
Courtesy of Independent Age

The journey determined her position as a writer of fiction in more ways than one. She came down with typhoid, took months to recover, and recognized, after falling ill during performances she undertook in 1902, that her continued poor health would not sustain the rigors of performance. The short fiction she thought she would write in order to "feel tidy intellectually" to justify her mission then grew into one long novel of her brothers' saga and, a few years later, into another, woman-centered novel about gold in Alaska as a metaphor not only for the last great adventure of the decade but also for faithfulness and family bonds, for women's friendship that enriched romance and marriage.

The Alaskan fiction made possible Elizabeth Robins' next important phase, that of spokesperson for woman's suffrage in Great Britain. While Robins' own

contemporaries were very much aware that her voice lent weight to the cause and while more and more scholarship credits Robins' play *Votes for Women* for documenting the politics of the W.S.P.U., a true picture of her influence in her times is just beginning to emerge.

Further Notes and Bibliographies

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

Unavailable at the time of the conference, the dueling scene from the film of Bernhardt as Hamlet is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp_v_dP8s-8.

Readers interested in the wider influence of Elizabeth Robins should be aware of the 1994 Bibliography by Sue Thomas, now online at this address, https://victorianfictionresearchguides.org/elizabeth-robins/.

Updates to the Sue Thomas bibliography, with a few overlapping titles from the major pre-1994 works are at the Robins Web, https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/jgpaps/index.html.

A Chronology was published in *The Alaska Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900,* and is enhanced at this address, https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/erchron.html.

References to Robins' interest in *The Woman in Battle* by Loreta Janeta Velazquez were first identified in my dissertation, "'Sometimes Suppressed and Sometimes Embroidered': The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952." U Mass Amherst, 1987, p. 527. Diary entries of 1911-1912 indicate that she traveled to the British Library to read a copy there. No surviving drafts of any work Robins produced from reading Velazquez have surfaced.

Note that any direct quotations from archival material have been previously published in my academic press biography, 1994. Credit then was to Mabel Smith, literary executor for Elizabeth Robins. Currently (2022), Independent Age grants usage and 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."

Autobiographical Elements in Elizabeth Robins

Review of Sarah Bernhardt's Hamlet by Joanne E. Gates

ABSTRACT:

This paper analyzes the review that the American actress in London, Elizabeth Robins, published in 1900 in response to seeing Bernhardt's Hamlet. I will demonstrate how the essay reveals significant information about Robins' career on the American stage, for she felt compelled to compare Bernhardt's performance with details from Edmund Booth's Hamlet, which Robins so very vividly remembered because she had such direct contact with his performances. Booth's Hamlet, as Robins reveals in an unpublished autobiographical novel, was the inspiration and salvation for the young Robins. When she first earned her way into the "bill-posters' seats," at the top of the gallery to experience Booth's Hamlet, she was struggling to justify the poverty she endured before she got her first stage role. Later, she performed in Booth's productions, most regularly during his co-productions with the Boston Museum Theatre in the early 1880s and in his tour with Lawrence Barrett in 1887-1888.

Unlike Bernhardt who acted into her later years, Robins--who had electrified London audiences with her performances of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler and Hilda in *The Master Builder*--gradually gave up her career on the stage in order to write and eventually to lobby for women's suffrage. Her unpublished stage fiction is a neglected aspect of her reputation. I elaborate upon the works only touched upon in my biography of Robins

(*Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist*, University of Alabama Press, 1994). Robins' fiction of stage life, especially her 1892 novella in which a leading British playwright searches for a performer with the talent of a younger Sarah Bernhardt, is a key to understanding both her relationship to the theatre and her emerging feminism. Life as the creator of Ibsen's heroines did not fully satiate Robins' talent. She not only has deep recall of Booth's Hamlet and makes important contrasts; she hints at why acting is limiting to her own ambitions.

Key words

Reclaiming Elizabeth Robins, Sarah Bernhardt, Hamlet, Edwin Booth, Elizabeth Robins Web, Robins in Alaska, Harry Buford, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, Henrik Ibsen, C. E. Raimond

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