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## Elizabeth Robins Portrays Working Women in Suffragette Literature: A Reflection through the Lens of the 2015 film, Suffragette

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Elizabeth Robins Portrays Working Women in *Suffragette*  
Literature: A Reflection through the Lens of the 2015 film,  
*Suffragette*

Joanne E. Gates, Jacksonville State University

Presented for SAMLA Conference, 2018 in Birmingham, AL, with the conference theme, "Fighters from the Margins: Socio-Political Activists and Their Allies."

Session 02.05 at 1:30 Friday November 2, 2018. Panel topic: Working Women  
*Suffragette's* Life Writing in Britain and America.

Chair, Sarah MacDonald. Co-presenters: Brandon Amos and Sarah MacDonald.  
See the program pages in a separate document.

I am the biographer of Elizabeth Robins as well as the editor of an alternate version of Robins' play *Votes for Women* (derived from the prompt book, and differing from the public domain texts printed first in 1907 and 1909). I am also a keen collector of the many other public domain editions of Robins' works. I have made it a long-established tradition to "expand the canon" whenever I teach Women's Literature, an upper-level and graduate class at JSU that primarily uses the Susan Gilbert and Sandra M. Gubar-edited *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. For a long time, I had permission to distribute the play in the Dale Spender anthology. Then Indiana University made

it available on their Victorian Women Writers website. Then the electronic picture images of the original public domain printing became available at open library, a unit of archive dot org. Later, Hathi Trust added the version as published in the U.S. In addition, I often suggest appropriate films to tie the important play by Elizabeth Robins *Votes for Women* into film treatments of the campaign for Women's Suffrage. The week that the Carey Mulligan *Suffragette* premiered in fall 2015, *Wall Street Journal* lexicographer Ben Zimmer credited Elizabeth Robins in a 1907 novel for the first known printed example of the positive re-appropriation of the word, invented to slander and minimize the movement. Zimmer's short piece did not name the novel nor acknowledge that the novel was based upon a play that was performed in April of 1907, one which had its gestation from the previous summer and fall and which even had Henry James remark in a private letter that he thought the play represented "The Suffragette movement hot from the oven!" Thus, I felt compelled to add a comment or two to the on-line version of Zimmer's piece. [See the end of this document.]

Neither the title of the movie nor the common usage of the word, Suffragette, is quite what Jill Liddington would wish if a true account of working women, Labour women, were as prominent as the more typical type of suffrage history, one that focuses on leaders, more specifically upon the Pankhursts as leaders of the "militant" WSPU. In fact, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, her co-author of *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, go to great lengths to establish a counter narrative of the non-WSPU suffrage movement; that within the Labour Party,

and these working-class movement people, are the "radical suffragists," never "suffragettes."

The 2015 film *Suffragette* chronicles the growing radicalism of a fictionalized common laundrywoman (portrayed by Carey Mulligan) so that it connects or flows into the climatic depiction of a real event, the dramatic suicide of Emily Wilding Davison who threw her body in front of the King's Horse at the Epsom Derby, June 1913. News reel cameras were running; the event was recorded, and the shock of the death of Davison resulted in a mass action solemn march through the streets of London for Davison's funeral procession. The film does not focus on the fact that even though Emmeline Pankhurst knew she might be rearrested (and she was, due to the cat and mouse act), she joined the procession. But the widespread solemn procession did serve to end the press's censorship on the suffrage demonstrations and protests, one of the larger themes in the film. Director Sarah Gavron's DVD commentary highlights the importance of discovery of footage they had not known existed, the silent cameras recording the Davison funeral procession. Both here and especially at the funeral procession for Davison, Gavron's film makes a very effective meld into this black and white documentary recording, then for a final montage, from the black and white documentary footage into the colored shots of many young women joining the procession as it passes. With this the final shot, a scroll of countries and their dates of passing women's suffrage completes the film. Other significant aspects of the commentary deserve mention: the project had

originally intended to focus more upon an upper-class woman, Alice Haughton, played by Romola Garai. Instead, with a team of researchers and some unpublished commentaries found in archives, the composite laundress emerged as central to the impact of the story for modern audiences.

Parenthetically, it seems appropriate to add that, upon the announcement that Meryl Streep would play Emmeline Pankhurst in a movie entitled *Suffragette*, one would be led to conclude: how could it not be a bio-pic, focusing on the charismatic but problematic leader of the WSPU. Gavron, in fact, mentions at the press conference that for two or three months, they had discussed how a bio-pic of Emmeline Pankhurst could be shaped. Instructors who teach the film might find valuable the remarks Streep made at BFI for the press conference at the release of the film. After a long litany of facts she did not know --about the conditions of women in England in 1913 (including that they could be married at twelve and any property she brought to a marriage became the property of the husband)-- Streep credited the construct of the film for focusing on the working woman: "I think that's part of why we can enter the film so easily and so empathetically, because Carey plays this young laundress who looks like us, but the circumstances of her life were out of her hands completely—this is such an important movie" (at 6:44 ff.).

#### BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OTHER FILM RESOURCES

Even the introduction to the first edition of *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, dated 1977, found objection to the way that one of the first film treatments that became widely distributed focused on just the Pankhursts. *Shoulder to Shoulder*, which had yet to be distributed in the U.S. as a Masterpiece Theatre production, emphasized the spectacles created by the WSPU. One might also fault the Ken Burns documentary of the American Women's Suffrage movement, *Not for Ourselves Alone*. I learned from private conversation with Jane Marcus that *Shoulder to Shoulder* was deemed flawed because creator Midge Mackenzie objected to Alistair Cook's introductions to the Masterpiece Theatre's airing of the series in America. The Ken Burns special that looks at the struggle through the leaders' perspectives, by contrast, streams at some university libraries. As I mentioned, I am always looking for a good film to pair with *Votes for Women*, the 1907 play that is the precursor to the novel Ben Zimmer mentioned. For a brief while, I advocated the film in which Hilary Swank portrays Alice Paul in the most active part of the Suffrage confrontations with Wilson's White House, *Iron Jawed Angels*. In that movie, Angelica Huston plays the less militant but establishment leader Carrie Chapman Catt. Although the distribution of *Iron Jawed Angels* was through the HBO, not a commercial movie house film, the premiere garnered some attention. Hilary Swank gave a moving talk at the National Press Club. The triumphant conclusion with a stirring scene of the Tennessee Legislature voting to be the necessary state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment is commendable.

In my most recent teaching of the course, I dispensed with outside tie-ins because I had access to the film of the Marcia Rock staged reading of Act II which took place at NYU for an early 1990s March Women's History Month event. This conference call had just gone out and I wanted to use the spare class time that a fast-paced summer course imposes on us to play the Working Woman's speech that opens act 2. Then I required all to post a comment on her persuasiveness. They had to listen carefully to her cockney accent. And they had to deal with the intricately cued interrupters that were part of the original Harley Granville Barker Prompt book. I had, after all, had the good fortune to prepare that text for publication and in the process distributed my typescript and bound copy to other Robins scholars.

Here, for this paper, I will set the 2015 released film *Suffragette* within a context of the efforts Elizabeth Robins made to document and, by witnessing, to advocate, the early phases of the British Women's Suffrage Movement in England. I want to maintain that, despite Robins later association with the WSPU leadership, her novel and the play it was based upon maintain the ideal of united efforts on behalf of suffrage. Yes, at the opening of the play, it is obvious that most established "weekender" personalities who are staying over at a landed estate (think *Downton Abbey* in its early episodes) have fun objecting to the "tactics" of the recent outburst at the House of Commons. When the most unknown and mysterious guest emerges, it is clear she has been invited there to "rest." It turns out that her current social mission is to build adequate shelters

for homeless women. When we find out that the sister of the hostess has rescued this woman, only introduced as Miss Levering, without a first name, from a serious medical misfortune when she was in distress several years ago, the language becomes extremely coded. This upper class gathering does not consider it proper to outwardly discuss abortion; moreover, the sister of the hostess plots to shield even vague hints from the young Scottish heiress who has just become engaged to a rising politician. Robins fills her long first act with the derogatory banter about the outrageousness of the suffrage militants. One who would be most sympathetic to the wider cause admits that their tactic of raising their voices from the gallery of Parliament has set the political effort to pass suffrage back for decades. But then Miss Levering seems so to captivate the young heiress, Jean Dunbarton, connecting her social work with the need to be at the Suffrage rally later that Sunday afternoon, that Jean schemes and invents an excuse to rush back to town. Parliament member and her fiancé Geoffrey Stonor sees no alternative to Jean's determination but to offer her his motorcar and accompany her. Although we detect a shy and guarded demeanor on the part of Miss Levering, we do not know what it portends until Robins cleverly plants an important piece of exposition. Miss Levering has unconsciously dropped her embroidered handkerchief that she had used as a bookmark. A few pages later, the telegram that only Jean has read happens to drop near it. She is using the telegram's arrival to fabricate her need to be in London, that afternoon; it is only an invitation to dine with someone the following week). When Stonor reads



the contents, he admires Jean for making up her excuse, but when he examines the handkerchief, he knows it is Miss Levering's. He identifies it as hers and Jean handles it to return it. A two-part burst of exposition comes from Jean as she reads the name embroidered: "But that's not an L! It's V-I --!" – Miss Levering exits, called by Lady John the hostess. Jean has the last line of the act to Stonor alone: "*I didn't know her name was Vida; how did you?*" (*Votes* 48; citations from public domain text at Open Library)

This significant hint that Stonor knows Vida from the past is exploited for the climax of Act Two. Much like the "town meeting" scene of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*," Act Two recreates a suffrage rally at the base of the Nelson Monument, Trafalgar Square. Three significant speakers precede Vida's speech, those of the "Working Woman," of the petite Suffrage organizer given the fictional name Ernestine Blunt (likely modeled upon Mary Gawthorpe), and a male Labour Leader. The meeting chairman tries to keep order, but Robins enhances her play text with indications there are reactions from the crowd. In fact, Harley Granville Barker's prompt book contains a meticulous scoring of keyed interruptive commentary. It's a *tour de force* scene that is meant to balance the persuasiveness of platform speaker with some skeptics and, more increasingly as the act builds, with those who show they have been persuaded. Arriving late in the scene, but positioned at the side of the stage and nearest to us, are the newcomers Jean, Stonor, Lady John. Vida is the fourth and very reluctant speaker, never having spoken at a rally before. She falters, is almost

shouted down, but is given a chance to re-start her remarks after Ernestine Blunt insists that she be heard. Vida takes great pains to connect the Suffrage prisoners whose cases she went to hear at their court trial with other cases being heard at court during the same session. A very young boy was being tried for stealing milk. Again, and very tactically, Robins touches upon the experience of the lowest class. The playwright directs us to notice that Stonor and Vida Levering recognize each other. She is momentarily unsteady but recovers. He turns away, keeping his collar up. Then Vida continues her account of Court proceedings: a working girl who had left the dead body of her new born illegitimate child at the doorstep of her master, then crawled away and fainted, was being tried for murder. Vida complains that the man is let off, but she reminds the crowd that the prison sentence which the woman faces is not one that is handed down by a jury of her peers. The Labour Party has been a key theme by previous speakers; vocal outbursts seem to represent the Labourites. At this point, she recreates in vivid detail the lonely time when women labor to deliver a child:

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 struggled through to put each man here into the world. (*Votes 78*)

Jean suddenly "knows" that Vida and Stonor's past has included the intimacy that is not unlike the girl who accused her master of paternity and abandonment.

As Vida is making her conclusion with the crowd, consciously connecting the conditions of equal justice for women with this campaign for voting rights, asking for their money and their participation, Stonor is struggling to persuade Jean to follow him, but Jean is transported by Vida's complete argument, and leaves to follow her to "ask that woman to let me have the honour of working with her" (80).

Some will argue that act three of Robins' play devolves into a blackmail situation: Vida uses the naive Jean, who thinks she can forfeit her relationship with Stonor and enact his reconciliation with Vida. Vida only wants Stonor to understand her political position. Once she has his understanding, she knows she can enact Stonor's "payment," his written endorsement of Women's Suffrage as a position shift, coming as it does at the climax of the Parliamentary election campaign. No suffrage activist in the spring of 1907 might have anticipated eleven more years of unsuccessful action by Parliament. Robins manages to show a true conversion of a male spokesperson, convinced that his shift will give him important momentum, that countering his opponent's bold announcement on another issue he can secure the seat and possibly a position in the Cabinet.

Robins' text is aspirational; when it was published in 1909, she still maintained that it was a "dramatic tract." Yet the novel that grew from the play and published before it, in the fall of 1907, shows more thematic artistry and a better weaving together of a larger fabric of women's issues. (My very first

academic paper published on Robins argues for this artistic fabric of the later written novel, partly because it demonstrates the gradual evolution of commitment, carefully nuanced and resonant.) Her mostly upper-class characters are exposed to those who cannot make ends meet almost as decorative frills, purposefully entertaining because they suspend the inevitable display of certain conversion. However, the large theme of working together, of giving support across class lines, is unmistakably present. We must keep in mind that Robins could look over the looming split between the militancy of the WSPU and the more parliamentary and broader socialist issues that held priority for the Labour Party and strive to maintain a foot in both camps.

The film for some might be equally flawed. Its climatic conclusion that is wrapped around the Emily Wilding Davison events expects us to know that the fleeting, probably disappointing, appearance of Emmeline Pankhurst is due to the fact that under the Cat and Mouse Act, she can be subject to re-arrest. Maud is mesmerized when Pankhurst speaks from a balcony. We see the police tackle Pankhurst on the way to her cab. Then they realize it is her body double. The real Mrs. Pankhurst has sneaked out the back, unseen by the police, and has a quick but inspirational talk with Maud. The appalling physical torture of forcibly feeding the hunger strikers had been replaced with the "Cat and Mouse Act": suspending the sentence of a hunger striker until she was healthy enough to serve more of her term. The working-class heroine played by Cary Mulligan who

accompanies Davison to the Derby, is fictional, but she captures so many connected images she rises to heroine status.

Most poignant is that she loses custody of her son. Her arrests have kept her away from the home. Though her husband is a caring man, he arranges to have their six-year-old adopted. She kneels to her son as he is escorted away and pleads with him to remember the name of his mother. The moment tears at the heart. In another segment near the end, Maud leads a younger laundress to the home of a well-off suffrage lobbyist, and we see that Maud is determined to break the chain of successive sexual exploitations that she herself had endured.

Elizabeth Robins wrote and participated across margins. An expatriate American living in England, she had no personal advantage to gain with a franchise. In her late forties and in ill health, she took perhaps only "safe" opportunities to thrust herself into the fray. But as Jane Marcus points out, with Robins' research on the play that became *Votes for Women*, she took efforts to experience how working-class experiences were key to political success for the women's movement. Her character Vida in the novel version interviews a young militant who is rumored to carry a dog whip. The suffragette explains that it is for self-protection from being sexually fondled in the streets. Maud performs courageous acts of putting down the abuser/ manager and rescuing a friend's daughter from near assault.

Just as screenwriter Abi Morgan created Maud's circumstances that propelled her into political action, Robins fictionalizes the cockney voice of "Working Woman" for her play and novel. Moreover, her other middleclass laboring woman, a true organizer and inspired platform feature, is reportedly modeled on the real-life Mary Gawthorpe. In addition to these featured fictional characters (reprised for a late 1907 expansion to novel from of the play, *The Convert*), Robins returns, again and again in *Way Stations* (her collection of articles and editorials on suffrage), to the plight of the working-class woman. It is also clear, especially from reading her private correspondence, that Christabel Pankhurst and other suffrage leaders sought her out so that her voice, whether from speaking engagements or in print, would lend prestige to the Cause. I first discovered the Mary Gawthorpe connection to Elizabeth Robins in a penciled note in the U Mass Library copy of *The Convert*. Gawthorpe's autobiography *Up Hill to Holloway* and other evidence confirms her diminutive height that Robins likely consciously lifted to establish the character of the fiery Ernestine Blunt. I discovered an even more interesting connect to working class assistance provided to Robins in Hannah Mitchell's autobiography. Liddington and Norris's *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* takes its title directly from a phrase out of Mitchell's autobiography, "No cause can be won between dinner and tea, and most of us who were married had to work with one hand tied behind us, so to speak" (99 of 194, Kindle edition). But I had not investigated Mitchell's story until reading in director Sarah Gavron's article that

Carey Mulligan carried around Mitchell's autobiography as she was working on her part of Maud for the film *Suffragette*. The most relevant passage is this:

Shortly after this came a by-election at Huddersfield. With all her ablest lieutenants in prison Mrs. Pankhurst asked me to go there with her to open a campaign against the Government. It was difficult for me to leave home just then, but I went with her. On the night of our arrival, we two alone held a meeting at the market cross which roused so much interest that at the close we had enough volunteer to bill the town next day. Presently women began to arrive from all parts –Mrs. Martel from London, Mrs. Coates-Hanson from Middlesbrough, Mrs. Baines from Stockport, Alice Milne from Manchester—to offer help in the campaign. Elizabeth Robins the writer came, she said, to get the atmosphere. I had several talks with her about writing, and she strongly advised me to try my hand at it. Later, in her book *The Convert*, she used one or two incidents which I told her. The Huddersfield campaign was a wonderful experience, like putting a match to a ready-built fire. The Yorkshire women rose to the call and followed us in hundreds. My cousin who lived there all her life said to me many years later. 'Never was there such a time in Huddersfield, either before or since.'

. . . The Liberal won the seat with a reduced majority. All three candidates are dead now and forgotten, but Huddersfield still remembers the Suffragettes. (Kindle edition at 125-6 of 194)

Robins' previous writing achievements hardly left her economically secure, and she risked disapproval from important mentors Florence Bell and William

Archer for her feminist advocacy. Yet she won over George Bernard Shaw and Henry James. In a private letter, James had pronounced the play, still without its final title and still un-produced, as "the Suffragette Movement Hot from the Oven" in late 1906.

Robins' interest in the case of Lady Constance Lytton, who dressed as the common seamstress Jane Warton in order to be subject to the same brutal treatment as the lower classes. This was the subject of one segment of the six-part *Shoulder to Shoulder* and, considerably before my real scholarship on Robins began at the Fales Library, I took the creative license to make Robins *aware* of Lytton's plan to disguise as a common seamstress: Before I undertook my dissertation work, I scripted a play, *Hedda and Hilda and I*, one act of which focuses upon her Ibsen performances, the other set ten years later, with "youth knocking at the door." When Robins expanded *Votes* into *The Convert*, she herself had used the same phrase (from Ibsen's *The Master Builder*). Current students have told me that if one is absent just one day from a history class, the Suffrage struggle is as if it were never taught. Reading *Votes for Women*, a graduate student commented she was surprised because she had not been remotely aware that there was a body of literature that came out of that historical movement (and she had specialized in the woman's slave narrative by Harriet Jacobs, another important genre of didactic literature).



Sarah Gavron mentioned in her press conference that it was Carey Mulligan who "found the quote" that has such an impact on the ending of the film. The use of Olive Schreiner's "Dream" functions as a text that works as talisman, passed on from prisoner to prisoner, and indeed comes from Lytton's *Prisons and Prisoners*. But is the "society" of suffragette activists, earning a pin with bars on it when they are released from prison, functioning like recruits, represented as purely idealistic? Yes, in reflection, and at the risk of distorting the condemnation of their most violent acts and the Pankhursts' most autocratic demands of their followers, the film almost necessitates the glorification of the extremes of the campaign. Mulligan at the press conference rejected any connection between recruitment for the "right" cause of Women's Votes and today's unspoken but obvious jihadist recruitment. She did express disbelief that the suffragettes destroyed art work (but the film makes her character complicit in the fire-bombing of an empty house of the new Prime Minister).

[The premiere of the film was tainted briefly by the Pankhurst quotation on t-shirts scandal, worn by select members of the cast at a *Time Out* interview. Streep briefly defended the slogan, "I'd rather be a rebel than a slave." See the Julie Wittes Schlack item in my bibliography for how she listened to responders and altered her original reaction that the use of Pankhurst's phrase was merely "tone deaf" and clarified that it was "needlessly inflammatory."]

We still have a lot to sort out about the divisions of leadership and who endorsed what tactic. Director Gavron was quick to point out that any militancy attributed to suffragettes was explicitly ordered from the top to exclude any attack on lives. My take on how Robins asserted her distance from the growing autocracy of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst is worth pursuing, but I am afraid that is another paper. In the meantime, though, I hope that we can all in our own way, work for a future that reclaims the past.

Joanne E. Gates, Jacksonville State University **HANDOUT**

Elizabeth Robins portrays Working Women in *Suffragette* Literature:  
A Reflection through the Lens of the 2015 film, *Suffragette*  
SAML A 02:05 Room I

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[Since the presentation of this paper, Elaine Weiss's book on the adoption of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, *The Woman's Hour* (2018), has inspired the PBS documentary, *The Vote*. An offshoot of this project is the one-hour documentary, *By One Vote: Woman Suffrage in the South*, <https://www.pbs.org/video/by-one-vote-woman-suffrage-in-the-south-8diwdv/>. Original air date 30 June 2020. May require subscription (PBS Passport) access.]

[The streaming of performance versions of *Votes for Women* by Elizabeth Robins is also an important development. Of special note are the highly crafted zoom edition from CestJackie (Jacqueline Elisabeth), and the filming of the stage play from Green College For direct links, see the *Votes* material at Robins web, <https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/erplays/index.html>.]

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

What is exciting for me as Robins scholar is that knowledge of her achievements always manages to fuel a next project. When I first spoke on the intersection between *Suffragette* and Robins, I reexamined my notes taken from her diaries and discovered a few poignant entries that documented the significance of this event.

Indeed, she was in the UK, and not on one of her many trips to Florida, where she had bought a home that became her brother and sister in law's primary residence.

First, she hears it as rumor. "June 4 1913: F (Flora Simmons) brings news Suff'gette tried to stop Kings horse!"

Then the next day June 5: "True! Emily Wilding Davison flung herself among the galloping horses." and "Everybody reading about it as I go to town. (London)

So, on the train from her home in south of England near Brighton: everybody is scanning the papers for the news of this event. Indeed, the story made headlines, as the film suggests.

Then next week has entries of her collaborative work on a play, at least two more fiction titles she never published.

On the 12th: "Great tales of the Suff. meeting & the bitter animus against the militants. "

*Shoulder to Shoulder* tells us Emmeline Pankhurst was re-arrested as she is about to step into the lines of marching women, perhaps making even more poignant the ending as it is filmed.

According to ER's diary entry of June 14: "News of Miss Davison's funeral procession in London & the re-arrest of Mrs. Pankhurst as she was about to join it."

on the 17th: Three days later, Robins is almost on her way to "New C." to protest the re-arrest of Pankhurst, but gets word she has been released.

My comments to Zimmer's column are likely not in the database version of his article:

Joanne Gates Oct 21, 2015

Like others who knew and worked with the Pankhursts, Elizabeth Robins eventually saw their leadership of the WSPU as over-authoritarian, but not before she devoted several productive years to speeches and articles on behalf of suffrage (collected and published in 1913 as *Way Stations*). She also borrowed Maud Pember Reeves's legendary tale and made use of Christabel Pankhurst's political diatribe against prostitution (*The Great Scourge*), fumbled around as potential collaborator with John Masefield for some months, then finally broke with him to pay tribute to her dearer friend W. T. Stead (recently sunk on the Titanic, author in 1885 of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*), to publish a sensational tale of a young girl's abduction into White Slavery. Now there's a movie: *My Little Sister*, 1913.

Joanne Gates Oct 18, 2015

It is good to see Elizabeth Robins credited for the fact that one of her characters re-appropriates the word suffragette for its positive and activist connotations. In November 1906, Henry James was using it privately to describe her play, as yet unperformed, and before it was titled *Votes for Women*, which immediately got expanded and adapted as the novel *The Convert*. He looked at the long first act and pronounced in a letter to Lucy Clifford it was "The Suffragette movement hot from the oven."

Robins likely contributed to remaking language in other ways: She presumed the French spelling of feminist, not having at hand a direct English etymology, when she authored "The Feminist Movement in England" in *Collier's Weekly*, June 29, 1907. She likely re-defined "Paternalism" in 1919.

Even as a schoolgirl in Zanesville, Ohio, she was consciously appropriating language, naming a short saga of the life of a button, "The Herstory of a Button" (published in *The American Voice*, 1990).

Abstract.

I place the 2015-released film *Suffragette* within a context of the efforts Elizabeth Robins made to document and, by witnessing, to advocate, the early phases of the British Women's Suffrage Movement in England. Robins wrote and participated across margins. An expatriate American living in England, she had no personal advantage to gain with a franchise. In her late forties and in ill health, she took perhaps only "safe" opportunities to thrust herself into the fray. But as Jane Marcus points out, with her research on the play that became *Votes for Women*, she took efforts to experience how working-class experiences were key to political success for the women's movement. Just as the film chronicles the growing radicalism of a fictionalized common laundrywoman (portrayed by Carey Mulligan) in order to dovetail with the dramatic death of Emily Wilding Davison who threw her body in front of the King's Horse and thus ended the press's censorship on the suffrage issue, Robins fictionalizes the cockney voice of "Working Woman" for her play and novel. Robins also took interest in the case of Lady Constance Lytton, who dressed as a common seamstress in order to be subject to the same brutal treatment as the lower classes. Robins returns, again and again in *Way Stations* (her collection of articles and editorials on suffrage), to the plight of the working-class woman. It is also clear, especially from reading her private correspondence, that Christabel Pankhurst and other suffrage leaders sought her out so that her voice, whether from speaking engagements or in print, would lend prestige to the Cause. Robins' previous writing achievements hardly left her economically secure, and she risked disapproval from important mentors Florence Bell and William Archer for her feminist advocacy. Yet she won over George Bernard Shaw and Henry James. In a private letter in late 1906, James had pronounced her play, still without its final title and still un-produced, as "the Suffragette Movement Hot from the Oven." The week that *Suffragette* premiered in fall 2015, *Wall Street Journal* lexicographer Ben Zimmer credited Elizabeth Robins in her 1907 novel for the first known printed example of the positive re-appropriation of the word, invented to slander and minimize the movement.



BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT: Over two decades ago, Joanne E. Gates published the first full length biography of Elizabeth Robins with the University of Alabama Press. It is currently available as eBook and in paperback edition. She has presented aspects of Robins at SAMLA and other conferences, including the MLA Convention and Ohio State's Symposium on First Actresses. She edited the promptbook edition of Robins' play, *Votes for Women*. She is professor [now emerita] of English at Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville Alabama, from where she has led discussions after showings of *The Suffragette*. Her website focuses on the public domain texts of Elizabeth Robins < <https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/>>.

Key words: Elizabeth Robins, Emmeline Pankhurst, Votes for Women, Emily Wilding Davison, Suffragette, Hannah Mitchell, Lady Constance Lytton, Sarah Gavron, Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep

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