

Henry James's Dictation Letter to Elizabeth Robins: "The Suffragette Movement Hot from the Oven"

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Any dependence on surviving records to document a decades-long friendship between a literary giant and a close confidante discloses merely the telegraphic and stichomythic highlights of just how they knew each other: She remembered their first meeting so vividly that she later must have asked if she could relieve James of his chair that she felt swallowed her up. *He retold with "very fine effect" a "nightmare" of her he had recounted to others* (WH). She was being taunted from behind by a little girl dressed entirely in red. He tried to warn her. She turned around, screamed and fainted. *He could not figure out why they were together in an all white room*. She recognized the setting of the white parlor, the last act of his recently failed play, *Guy Domville* (FB1). *He was her practical errand runner when she needed her large box of writing materials collected from her trip to Alaska shipped to her*. She sought advice when she was condensing a play. *He dictated forty-nine pages of notes on a short slice of the first scene*. She joked to their mutual friend that he just might steal her suffrage theme (FB2). *He squealed to Lucy Clifford that the letter she was reading of all his gossip about the new suffrage play was not to be circulated* (BW 59). She, when her only playwriting triumph premiered, would seem to be defying convention by not heeding the calls for the author to appear (VW). *He might have recognized a silent tribute to his own wounded psyche*. She would be as amazed as he that later scholars would misread their relationship, both personal and literary. *He encouraged her to mine her family papers for their literary value* (DI 6 Apr. 1914). She left unpublished some of her most insightful fiction and memoir. *His literary biographer presumed control of her archive and set limits on its access* (Anesko). Her fictional self ended up in a novel about his moment of shame in front of the curtain (Lodge). *He learned*

his craft of economical exposition from the Ibsen plays she produced. She could no more forget the moment he fled the stage than forget her sight of a ship, stranded and wrenched by the current, cluttering the upper Yukon River with a name that combined his name and his play: the *James Domville* (AD 283).

Students of James know he lifted heavily from the real accounts of American suffragists for *The Bostonians* (which more or less pronounced the death knell of women's suffrage leadership in the middle 1880s) but dismissed as harmless the suffragist who, in 1912, slashed James Singer Sargent's portrait of him, his 70th birthday present from select admirers. Yet when the suffrage question was at its peak, what was James's position? Most reach to information that James accompanied his Rye neighbor Alice Dew-Smith to her local suffrage meetings (LL 442), but perhaps he attended out of sheer curiosity and not support. Certainly James kept in touch with many women who stood on opposite sides of the question. No better evidence of this comes from understanding that mutual friends Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins were equally at odds. Robins knew that Bell was anti-suffragist and even offered to retract her planned novel derived from the play *Votes for Women* if Bell found the politics of it too forced. The saga of Robins consulting James for assistance as she was readying her play version is unfinished without further examination of a crucial document. That James unhesitatingly reinforced Robins on her subject proves she genuinely trusted his advice. What is for certain is that James thoroughly and wholeheartedly, even if only for a span of a few days, thrust himself into the finer details of play editing. This and his expressed elation at her success (TF 261–64) prove that their friendship assumed that political issues of the day could make excellent theatrical fireworks.

Those who work with the letters of Henry James cannot neglect the Elizabeth Robins volume that appeared in 1932, *Theatre and Friendship: Some Henry James Letters with a Commentary by Elizabeth Robins*. Robins chronicles her initial formal contact performing Claire de Cintré in his stage adaptation of *The American*.¹ She gives a detailed account of James's enthusiasm for her late 1890s efforts to bring serious and artistic works to the stage and his assistance in making an awkward translation of *Mariana* more stageworthy. Prefacing five letters of 1906–07 grouped with the sparsest of commentary under the chapter title "Votes for Women," Robins explains, "Mr. James had heard from me that I wanted to talk over my rough draft of a play dealing with Militant Suffrage. A number of letters passed and several meetings were entirely devoted to this congenial subject!" (TF 258).

But there is another source that elucidates both James's efforts to help Robins's playwriting and their discussion of suffrage. Omitted from the published collection of 1932, and until recently neglected by those who have calendared and collected James's letters, is a remarkable dictation letter, composed over four days, that was occasioned by James offering, in November 1906, to supply comments to her early but completed version of the play that would be staged at the Court Theatre in April 1907 as *Votes for Women*!²

Robins described the effort James made to assist her in a letter to Florence Bell: "Think!—half a hundred pages dictated about the 1st third of the 1st Act—& he vastly busy!" (FB2). These forty-nine numbered and double-spaced pages—sprinkled with generous doses of James reading lines of the play to his typist to clarify his points—show the mark of the conversational James as vividly as any letters he dictated.

Neither Robins nor James over the course of their correspondence about this project alluded directly to *The Bostonians*. Yet Robins mirrors James's novel with a feminist twist in *Votes For Women*. In Robins's triangle of influence, the Basil and Olive antagonists are a British aristocrat, Geoffrey Stonor, and a woman, Vida Levering, whose mysterious past has turned her into a social reformer. These two indirectly tangle over who possesses their young Verena. Here the younger woman is a Scottish heiress, Bee Dunbarton, just announced as Stonor's fiancée. Despite a warning to stay clear of the older woman (whose secret is that she has had an abortion), Bee is compelled to follow her to a suffrage rally. As Miss Levering is speaking from the platform, Bee experiences a shock of recognition that it is her own husband-to-be who had previously abandoned the suffragist, and this turns the young fiancée into the suffragist's advocate. Robins resolves her plot so that the younger woman (Bee in this version, Jean in *The Convert* and the 1909 published version of *Votes*) demands that her fiancé, Stonor, make reparations to the woman he had abandoned. Stonor, himself a rising politician, keeps his young bride and placates the lover he abandoned by telegraphing his support of women's suffrage to his party office, genuinely converted to the position because of both women's persuasiveness.

The packets of dictation James sent Robins should put to rest any claims that James had a collaborative hand in either the earlier play project or the novel, which greatly expands the back story of the play. Yet the document is worthy of some recognition for these reasons: it is perhaps one of the longest of his dictation letters, it provides as close an example of his conversational style as any that survive, and it proves that he can set aside and accept as superb the most politically incendiary moments of the play in order to fine-tune the particulars of character introduction. James apparently sent out sections of the notes as he completed annotating them. She may have picked the last of the packets during a planned meeting. Robins wrote that they had discussed the play for more than two hours late at night and that "He would have gone on supplying me with help I am quite sure had I stayed in town. He is greatly under the spell still of the 'play form'—he owned that just this little bit of trying to work over another person's play—just *that* made him long to try his luck again!" (FB2).

Although the failure of his play *Guy Domville* in January 1895 could never be far from either writer's mind (and is imaginatively rendered as if through Robins's consciousness in David Lodge's *Author, Author*), their discussion of plays and play projects deserves further clarification beyond what Robins gives in her commentary on her published James letters in *Theatre and Friendship*. Eric Savoy has sketched some of the important highlights that Robins includes in *Theatre and Friendship*. Robins had consciously decided not to take a curtain call after *Hedda Gabler*, only because it seemed inconsistent with Hedda's fate. It was the cry for "Author, Author" that doomed James when George Alexander staged his *Guy Domville*. When *Votes for Women!* premiered, the *Times* noted: "Persistent calls at the fall of the curtain did not induce the author to appear" ("Votes").

Lest one think of the impact of *Guy Domville* has been inflated by later creative or psychoanalytic suppositions about James, there is good evidence from Robins's diary that she felt the experience as much a debacle for James as he felt it was by conveying his dream to her. Proof that there is a poignant link between the curtain call for Robins's successful play and the ridicule James met at the conclusion of *Guy*

Domville emerges in Robins's 1900 diary of her Alaska trip. Thousands of miles from London, traveling the Upper Yukon River by steamboat, Elizabeth Robins comments about a stretch of river that is treacherous to the riverboats that travel there. Suddenly she is taken back to a time in January 1895 when, in the confines of her box at the St. James's Theatre, she witnessed the humiliation of her friend. In her diary entry of 23 August 1900, Robins notes:

The evil name given the "30 Mile"—current terrible "eddies are the devil"—up and down the trail the word used to be passed, "Look out for the current in the 30 Mile and see you aren't driven on the west shore of Windy Arm by the devil of a breeze that's always blowing." . . . But in the treacherous 30 Mile—among the many that rock and rot deep out of sight is the *Florence* just under water for a sharp "riffle" in the swift flood to tell where she lay. We pass her 7:15. 9:00, we see the *James Domville* of Vancouver, fine big steamer, canted a little and "broken backed," her spine miserably twisted [—] altogether the most "wry" and distressed looking wreck I've ever seen. I think of another *Domville* likewise lost in the treacherous sea of publicity, that wreck too not unconnected with the name of James. The boat was lost in the Spring of '99. (AD 283)

The online site for the Dawson City Museum posts a remarkable photo of the *James Domville*, its crippled stranding a haunted relic, with the ship's name partially visible (see Fig. 1). Robins was in the final weeks of her quest to reconnect to two brothers who had struck out for gold in the rush to Dawson two years previously. She would recall that James and she shared an "Alaskan" connection in that his acquisition of Lamb House in Rye was made possible by the owner's desire to partake in the gold rush (TF 223–24).

Not only does *Theatre and Friendship* represent merely surface impressions of a more complete friendship, its incompleteness has led scholars to speculate on their relationship. Typical of critics who misread the Robins-James friendship are the two extreme reactions to a twice-published letter to Lucy Clifford from February 1907, one by Seymour, the other by Leon Edel. Because James gossips that Robins had just arrived in a rush as he had got up to leave and was "on such a footing of universal engagement and entanglement and with not a minute to be able to arrange for" (HJL 436), Miranda Seymour speculates that there is a hint of intimacy to the relationship that one or the other is hiding (173). In fact, James, the dramaturg, is privy to more than should be public about negotiations Robins is having with the actress Gertrude Kingston (who had originally commissioned Robins to write a play). He also hints at the possibility that Kingston's hesitation might result in negotiating the play away from her, potentially replacing her with Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Surprisingly, Leon Edel, in his note to the same Clifford letter, suggests that Robins was getting collaborative help from both Mrs. Pat and Gertrude Kingston (HJL 438n). James knows just enough of Robins's intense scramble to break her contract with Kingston and negotiate a better deal with Harley Granville Barker that he warns Clifford not to spread his gossip, using a flair of mock-tragic ultimatums: "Only repeat me, quote me, betray me not—and burn my letter with fire or candle (if you have *Either!* Otherwise wade out into the sea with it and soak the ink out of it)." ³ He writes this after teas-



Figure 1. “Wreck on Thirty Mile River.” 1899.
 (The *James Domville* of Vancouver B.C.). Kinsey
 & Kinsey, Photographers. Dawson City Museum
 1990. 62.4.

ingly disclosing too much, that the play is “fine and strong of a high ‘actuality’—the suffragette movement hot from the oven” (*BW* 59).

James was not adverse to belittling the motives and demands of Kingston in his dictation letter of the previous November. He could sense that Robins’s project had merit enough for her to stand ground and demand time for revisions:

Let me say in answer to your note of this morning that I am sorry you are being so pressed and hustled by G. K. and the time-question, for I hold distinctly that this way lie madness and ruin. It is the old story of the dreadful Theatric Person, to listen to whom is to be condemned from the first to the tenth-rate and the treacherous! She really wants but one thing, which is to be as soon as much as possible in evidence; for if she wants also the success of the thing by care and ponderation, she wants that only in the second degree; what she wants in the first is not to miss any of the time in which she *may* be in evidence. She would rather have three ^{^ immediate} disastrous plays than one possibly valid production for the real maturity and validation of which she [will] have to wait. And by disastrous I mean anything that goes into rehearsal with the smallest scrap of conscious invalidism about it. (*RN* 1)

Some of the printed record misrepresents James's contribution to the play project. Jane Marcus states that Robins had consulted Henry James, H. G. Wells, and William Archer to "diffuse male critical explosions in advance" (viii). Judging from material not at the time available to Marcus,⁴ most notably Robins's detailed correspondence to Florence Bell, this and her previous sentence that, "like much of women's writing," the play and novel were "collaborative efforts" are overstatements. On this project, Archer was mainly concerned that the play have adequate rehearsal. Later, he repeatedly warned her that her suffrage proclivities were damaging her career as writer. Robins was not to meet H. G. Wells until December 1906, with the play virtually done (*DI* 8 Dec. 1906). Yet in a 2004 essay on *The Convert*, Laura Winkiel distorts the record further with the uncredited assertion (presumably derived from Marcus) that "*Votes for Women!* was written in collaboration with Henry James, H. G. Wells, and William Archer" (573). Furthermore, the online calendar of James's letters has misstated the James contribution by claiming that "James helped her rework her play VOTES FOR WOMEN! (1907) into a novel THE CONVERT (1907)" (Jobe and Gunter). Although there were times while negotiations were underway that Robins wished she had given her time to novelizing the play, she did not really undertake that work until the summer of 1907. She was out of touch with James, who was on his motor tour in France for most of that time.

In his dictated notes, James is fixated on some very short sections of the opening moments of the full play. Other surviving drafts and correspondence make it clear that Robins had decided to condense the already completed play by merging her two scenes of act one to a single scene. James's suggestions for streamlining what had been the first (exterior) and second (interior) scene into a tight, single act of important exposition and character development acknowledge that Robins will find her own way to do most of what she needs. The most significant changes suggested by James are these: he reinforces Robins's own cover letter clarifying that a young political errand boy needs to urge Stonor to shake up his campaign with an important announcement, he argues that this person be the one who needs a telegraph message sent to the campaign office in the final act, and he makes it clear that the woman who knows Vida's past must initiate—not casually drift into—speaking to young Bee, Stonor's fiancée, to explain why she must have no future contact with Vida Levering. James takes such a leisurely and roundabout way to get to his points that Robins expresses bemusement at James's verbosity. She reported to her closer friend Florence Bell that, very shortly after James produced his pages, they met together for over two hours, late into the night; she even expressed some relief that Bell had offered her home in Yorkshire as an escape from London where she could redraft under her own terms:

He would prefer I think that no one saw his pages [—] he was touchingly anxious about their effect on the reader . . . asked with a queer pathos didn't I think his stuff very "playable"—"very close didn't you think?"—& I contrasted my discursiveness &c &c.

But he wasn't *sure* & he wanted to be sure. When he heard I'd been seeing you . . . he asked anxiously what you knew about his suggestions. I told him that you knew he had criticised greatly to my profit—no more.
(FB2)

Elsewhere, Robins says that a few swift and pointed suggestions from James assisted her in a crucial time of composition. James's aid was nothing close to collaboration. The mid-November missives and meetings were a rapid flurry that ceased just as rapidly. Robins's prefatory letter to James, inviting his responses, clarifies the essential reshaping she hopes to accomplish even better than James does. Bell expressed concern that James's influence would cause Robins to work on revisions for too long. Over December and January, Robins sought advice from others and refocused her energies on getting the third act true to her vision of the play. She related to Bell that Bernard Shaw and James M. Barrie thought highly of the play, and she took seriously Bell's prodding that there needed to be a more pointed impact of the final moment of the play. Yet James's commentary that wandered along from hesitant suggestion to firm nudging no doubt reinforced Robins's respect for his stylistic indirectness. He rarely suggests specifics. After he makes a case that Stonor needs to appear well-liked and the "Friend of Woman," he allows, "It ought to be perfect, it ought to be beautiful, and I shabbily leave *you* all the labour of making it so" (RN 13, 14). In the midst of reading back a section of her play to his typist, he interjects into one of the play's stage directions: "And I can't, ah me! tackle that detail now; only I want to give her the words, and their value, while he greets her" (23). He repeatedly turns "motive" into a verb or an adjective. He wants each character "projected, that is, by some efficient little pulse of breath of the moving action, *motiving* with absolute consistency every step or speech . . ." (6). A moment is "neatly motivated by the fact that . . ." (9); "the Uninformed Person has his prompt and sharply-motived entrance . . ." (10). James speculates at one point:

To this general end it seems to me awfully important there should be from the very first some little lucid, rapid, vivid, adequate presentation of the *Elements* at the place in question; some little preliminary exhibition of the flashed picture of the Who and the What, the Why, the Whence, the Whither, and the How, of four [or] five of the gathered people. (4)

Years later, the fact that Robins would affix to her most intimate portrait of James the same query, "Whither and How," would seem purely circumstantial. The linguistic echo of James pressing Robins on her plot-making is beside the point, perhaps, but her never published "Whither and How" and other unpublished documents provide significant details of their bond that, along with the remarkable "Rough Notes," give more understanding to their friendship than does the published record. In "Whither and How," meant to be the continuation of her stage memoir *Both Sides of the Curtain*, an early first meeting receives considerable attention. Even before James's first formal letter inviting her to be in his cast of *The American*, Robins establishes a personable James. He is both aloof and caring, but Robins counterpoints the friendship being established with James against her impassioned drive to secure the rights and a production for Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Moreover, details emerge that clarify some of the artifacts that confuse *Theatre and Friendship*. Notably, Robins makes much of the chair that swallowed her up as James was stuttering his request to have her play a very minor role. James would later arrange to pass the chair down to her, noting that she agreed to "relieve" him of it (TF 180). Even the rather public possession, Robins's photographic copy of the Sargent portrait of James, gains meaning as Robins responds

in her private diary to Mary Wood's attack on the painting at the Portrait Gallery. All subscribers to James's 70th birthday fund were gifted a photographic reproduction (*BW* 117). But when Robins read of the attack, she made a special effort to secure and frame this and her other photographs of James. Though underspoken as noted in her diary (*DI* 6 May 1914), the gesture to save James from the whacking of a woman who had no idea whose portrait she was striking confirmed how ill-at-ease Robins was with the militant tactics of the Women's Social and Political Union Leadership, a discomfort that had been building from the experiences she had writing letters in support of militant tactics in March, 1912.

As in life, both Robins and James in their fiction cultivated the symbolic action with which artifacts anchored a plot. His own mastery of the form is indisputably *The Golden Bowl*.

The best of Robins's plots that do this include not only *Votes for Women* but an unproduced play, *The Silver Lotus*, and her next plot, *The Florentine Frame* (1909), which, when Robins consulted him, James had pronounced more novelistic than dramatic. (She saw his point and immediately redrafted the planned play as fiction.)

In many of Robins's acknowledgements of James, she treasures his succinct advice: for instance, when he encouraged her to make use of her father's extensive records of life in the mining camps of Colorado (*DI* 6 Apr. 1914). In private notes to herself, she was not adverse to direct rebuttal when she found her own view of theater at odds with his manipulations of female character: she singled out a phrase in his preface to *The Tragic Muse* to authenticate her opposite approach when, in 1910, she undertook her ambitious *kunstlerroman* by fictionalizing her own breakthrough as a young American actress. Presumably, she objected to James for "The emphasis is all on an absolutely objective Miriam" (*TM* xv, referenced in *TH* Notes). Robins thus consciously rejects the construction of aesthetic creator from the male admirer's viewpoint. In the never-published "Theodora, or the Pilgrimage," Robins rejects objectivity in favor of internalizing an actress's epiphany. This young and struggling actress discovers in a flash that her elocution exercises make the brass curtain rod sing in harmonic parallel with her new-found artistic power. Robins here achieves, in recollecting her own past, a triumphant *kunstlerroman* in detailing her heroine's passion for the stage. Only her essay "Ibsen and the Actress" matches it for artistic enthusiasm. She no doubt gave James that optimistic insight into the drama of Ibsen. He never let go of his divided consciousness for the stage, belittling its crudeness yet keenly searching for the perfect theatrical catch of the breath, the *Aha!* moment of recognition that he could measure night after night with a new audience.

James embraced his task of dictating his impressions to Robins because he saw in her project the potential for such a shock of theatrical discovery. She took his sheaf of meticulous reminders not as so many small points to refine but as the essential confidence she needed to proceed with concentrated purpose. She retracted her offer to Gertrude Kingston. She persuaded Harley Granville Barker to direct the play for the Court Theatre. When they crossed a room going opposite directions a few months later, James could do nothing short of declaring her project "the suffragette movement hot from the oven" (*BW* 59).

NOTES

Permission to quote from the unpublished works of Elizabeth Robins is granted by *Independent Age*, Angela Bruce, Legacy Consultant, and Marvin J. Taylor, Director, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

¹John (96) and other Robins scholars notice that Florence Bell figures prominently in *Theatre and Friendship*. James scholars (perhaps beginning with Edel, who sees James's "Nona Vincent" as the best way to read the tri-part friendship) suggest the volume is weaker for its inclusion of Bell's letters. In fact, Bell's 1931 death initiated Robins's late phase of memoir writing, for Bell at her death arranged to return to Robins the expansive collection of Bell's letters to Robins.

²The typescript, with insertions and underlining in James's hand, is filed with the *Votes for Women* material of the *Elizabeth Robins Papers* (Fales Library, New York University, Box 71, Folder 5).

³Horne includes these sentences as an example of what might have happened to other James letters, but does not include the full letter (LL xviii).

⁴Marcus has communicated to the author that she felt denied access to the Elizabeth Robins Papers by Leon Edel until she completed her dissertation. See Walker and Crane for details on Edel himself inheriting this restriction from Henry James III. Further discussion of Edel's management of James's archive is in Anesko, who credits Hellman with a profile of Edel. Although acquired in 1964 through the encouragement of Edel, New York University did not undertake the processing and cataloging of the Robins papers until the mid-1980s, when staff member Ann E. Hagedorn initiated an NEH Grant for the purpose.

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

BW—"Bravest of Women and Finest of Friends": *Henry James's Letters to Lucy Clifford*. Ed. Marysa Demoor and Monty Chisolm. Victoria: English Literary Studies Monograph 80, 1999.

HJL—*Henry James Letters*. Ed. Leon Edel. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1980.

LL—*Henry James: A Life in Letters*. Ed. Philip Horne. London: Penguin, 1999.

RN—"Rough Notes from H. J." 13, 14, 15 Nov. 1906 (with a fourth section undated). Series Seven: Literary Productions, *Votes for Women*. Elizabeth Robins Papers. Box 71, Folder 5. Fales Library, New York University.

TM—*The Tragic Muse*. Vol. 1. New York: Scribner's, 1908.

WORKS BY ELIZABETH ROBINS

AD—*The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900*. Ed. and intro. Victoria Joan Moessner and Joanne E. Gates. Fairbanks: U of Alaska P, 1999.

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FB1—Letter to Florence Bell. 26 Jan. 1895. Elizabeth Robins Papers. Series VA, Box 1, Folder 4. Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

FB2—Letter to Florence Bell. 18 Nov. 1906. Elizabeth Robins Papers. Series VA, Box 2, Folder 15. Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

TF—*Theatre and Friendship: Some Henry James Letters with a Commentary by Elizabeth Robins*. Freeport: Books for Libraries P, 1969.

TH—"Theodora, or the Pilgrimage" (Unpublished novel). Elizabeth Robins Papers. Boxes 63–66. Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

VW—*Votes for Women! Victorian Women Writers Project*. <<http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/robins/votes.html>>

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