

Distinguished Women at the Fête

Speech at the Portman Rooms

MISS ELIZABETH ROBINS

NOTES: Earlier pages of the December 15, 1911 issue of *Votes for Women* summarize the bazaar held at the Portman Rooms, organized by Sylvia Pankhurst and the WSPU. As noted there, ER's remarks are prefaced by an Introduction by Mrs. Cavendish Bentinck and take place a day or two before those of Madame Lydia Yavorska, Countess Bariatinsky, also known as Princess Bariatinsky, who had performed *Hedda* in 1909 in London, then revived *A Doll's House* and *Hedda* in 1911. She had been known for riding on a white horse, representing her stage role Hedda Gabler, leading the counter coronation parade, organized by suffragettes, in June 1911. Elizabeth Robins published her preview of that event in *Westminster Gazette*. See *Way Stations*, Chapter 14. Princess Bariatinsky's remarks are printed on the same page as Bentinck's and Robins', with the page heading, "Distinguished Women at the Fête: Speeches at the Portman Rooms."

In the Sue Thomas Bibliography, this published record of ER's speech is organized in the subsection, Miscellaneous Articles:

185. et al. "Distinguished Women at the Fête. Speeches at the Portman Rooms."
Votes for Women 15 Dec 1911: 177.

Robins mocks the lack of presence of men at the Exhibition and emphasizes that the "militant" reputation of women lobbying for the vote cannot override their vast contributions to practical society. Readers should consult the Wiki article on "Hobble Skirts" or notice advertisements for this unusual fashion. See end notes for more details on the Fair and a separate program of the event.

[Prefaced by the Introduction of]

MRS. CAVENDISH BENTINCK.

Of course, I need not say anything about Miss Robins, but this I would say. We are told it takes all sorts to make a world, and it certainly takes two sorts. There is the majority: They come into the world, and they accept the world as they

found it, dirt and all. They pass a life comfortable or uncomfortable, and they leave the world as they found it. Then there is the minority. They do not intend to leave the world as they found it. They challenge all things, question customs, laws, superstition, conventionalities, and woe betide those that do not give them a satisfactory answer! The bad they reject, the good they urge on, and but for these restless spirits, we might all be still living in caves, unable to make a fire, incapable even of concerted action. To which of these two sorts Miss Robins belongs I think is evidenced by the names she has chosen for her books.

MISS ELIZABETH ROBINS.

Ladies and gentlemen, -- Yes, I shall say "gentlemen" to-day with an added emphasis. As a rule, women who speak in public in these days do so with their minds more intent upon women than on men. Here the case is otherwise. Personally I wish that these rooms had been filled with men every day this week. Not with those who are our friends and allies, but with the others.

Some of those others who penetrated the Portman Rooms may be supposed to have come with perhaps a consciousness of boldness and adventuring themselves on the scene of so much Feminine activity. We can imagine the anxious masculine eye on the lookout for the raging propagandist, and finding instead the woman gardener, the dairy farmer, and the rest -- women offering the produce of their poultry yards, of their market gardens, of the oven, and the loom, the overflow of their good housekeeping, to those who lack such wealth.

I am quite sure that a good many of the visitors to this fair must have been put in mind of those pre-manufacturing days when women could stay in their own homes and still be the great producers of the foodstuffs and the fabrics of the world: those old days when all women were spinsters, but when to be a spinster was

always an active, never a passive lot. Well, I admit that my imaginary concourse of men might say at that stall which is nearest to my heart, I mean the Book Stall. They might be put in mind of that old struggle between physical force and mental or moral force, a struggle that has been typified in the battle between the sword and the pen. They might remember that even in the palmy days of the sword, the battle was recognized to be an unequal one, with odds on the side of the pen.

If any of our books, or if our incomparable newspaper, VOTES FOR WOMEN, have brought a touch of sour anxiety to any manly visage, you are very considerately supplied an antidote just round the corner! Whose temper wouldn't sweeten as he takes in our homemade chocolates and preserves? Yet I am not sure but what an even more reassuring exhibit (in the eyes of any doubting brother) will be found at the Hat Stall. I saw there yesterday some most unbusinesslike specimens, calculated, I think, to inspire the greatest confidence in the mind of man. I even heard a rumour that hobble skirts were to be had here. I never quite appreciated the hobble skirt until recently, when I realized that it had a value I had not suspected. The hobble skirt came to the fore at the psychological moment, when women were unhobbling themselves in every other direction. And I feel sure that the spectacle of thousands of women meekly submitting to the tyranny of the hobble skirt -- has been a priceless comfort to many an anxious soul.

One thing is sure. No one could leave these rooms and not feel that this display as a whole, coming as it does out of times so full of distraction and unrest, this display offers an eloquent reminder to those who need such a reminder, of the invincible womanliness of woman, of the pre-eminence of that spirit in her which seeks expression in works of beauty and of use. Finally, this bazaar is a witness of the further fact of no small significance: that out of the more active camp have come these notable examples of the arts of peace.

FURTHER NOTES: Source is the xerox copy from my visit to the Women's [Fawcett] Library, 1985, proofread against the online copy now at LSE, which establishes "No Known Copyright."

Image of the text is online at the Library for London School of Economics, which absorbed the Women's Library collections.

Image location: <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/Documents/Detail/votes-for-women.-dec-15-1911/180150?item=180154>

If the above link is inactive, go to the main page, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/>. Search "*Votes for Women* Dec 15 1911"

Also included in the Pamphlets Collection at LSE's digital library is the program book, listing each day's events and providing a guide to the many booths. Although the quality the reproduced pages is not the highest (the WSPU printed the booklet with suffrage colors, purple and green, which have faded), Elizabeth Robins appears on page 23, where she is listed as speaker who declares the Fair open on December 6. Mrs. Cavendish Bentinck is listed second, but designated the Chair. Note that the *Votes for Women* documentation of her speech gives Princess Bariatinsky's first, though she is listed in the program as speaker to declare the Fair open for December 8, with Ethel Smyth in the Chair.

ER listing in the program for the December Fair and Festival at the Portman Rooms, sponsored by National WSPU:

<https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/Documents/Detail/womens-suffrage-pamphlets-vol-3-part-1-of-2/323452?item=323475>

The "Hobble Skirt"



1911 sketch from Wiki Commons

Transcribed and annotated for the Robins Web at Jacksonville State University

Joanne E. Gates, Project Director