

Elizabeth Robins and the 1891 Production of *Hedda Gabler*

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On 1 June 1891, when the controversy and success of the Elizabeth Robins production of *Hedda Gabler* had subsided after the longest run to date of any Ibsen play in London, publisher William Heinemann reprinted a deluxe "Large Paper" edition of the English translation that he had introduced in January. Ostensibly, this edition preserved the version of the play as it had been performed in April and May at the Vaudeville Theatre. Translator Edmund Gosse added an introduction which praised the London performers and stressed that "the version here printed is that which they used," except that, "for working purposes, and to avoid certain crudities of the original, they made a few highly judicious alterations." The large paper edition of the play testified to the astounding new popularity of Ibsen's drama. And, as Gosse most elaborately pointed out, the success of the production was due primarily to the acting talent of Elizabeth Robins.

Yet a careful comparison of this edition of Gosse's *Hedda Gabler* with the version of the text preserved in Robins's promptbook for Hedda's part reveals that the "few highly judicious alterations"¹ amounted to a complete retranslation, but that none of these changes made their way into the fancy edition printed with Gosse's introduction. In short, the spoken play and the Heinemann-Gosse reedition are two separate translations. Robins partly accounts for the discrepancy in *Ibsen and the Actress*, where she writes that she has somewhere the sets of page proofs of the Heinemann-Gosse *Hedda Gabler* with changes that she and fellow actress Marion Lea marked for production.² She leaves hints in her published accounts of production efforts that her knowledge of Norwegian was a helpful asset.

Gay Gibson Cima has examined Robins's annotations from her side or promptbook and analyzed the thoughtful staging decisions which marked Robins's production.³ Little has been said, however, about the simple but significant fact of Robins *having* artistic control over her production. Only in

Robins's private papers, in an unfinished and unpublished later volume of her autobiography, "Whither and How,"⁴ do the details emerge to explain how the translation dispute which erupted when Gosse's first edition appeared in January evolved into her independent production. Because that production converted new and important enthusiasts to the Ibsen movement, the Robins *Hedda Gabler* may be credited with changing the course of English drama. Consequently, my purpose here is to relate Robins's untold story in order to demonstrate that her struggles to secure the part and her contributions to the retranslation of the acting version are as greatly significant as her on-stage triumph.

One reason for Robins's astounding success in the part of Hedda was her fierce determination to surmount the lack of opportunities available to someone as talented as she. An American actress, Robins came to England in 1888. By then she had achieved modest success in the United States, having performed what she estimated to be over 300 roles in the Boston Museum Company and on tour with James O'Neill, Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett. Yet, until the fall of 1890, she had hardly the glimmer of a chance to make a name or even to earn her living on the London stage. During that fall, she was engaged to play in the stage adaptation of Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*. It was the first time that her successful notices were coupled with an extended run. She formed a close friendship with another American actress in the company, Marion Lea, who was equally dissatisfied with the lack of advancement for talented performers. In November 1890, weeks before *Hedda Gabler* appeared, the management announced that the Dostoevski piece would close because attendance had slackened. Lea and Robins shared their disappointment by privately attacking conditions of the English theatre which left the superior drama unperformed and skilled actors without work. Commercial contracts often bound performers to one theatre exclusively, thus locking them into a single character line and discouraging any opportunity for appearances in special matinees. The two actresses would not accept these conditions as their fate. They formed the Robins-Lea Joint Management and approached theatres with their plan to produce *The Lady from the Sea*.

Ibsen was a natural choice for their first venture, not primarily because his drama was packed with social questions, but because Robins felt that he offered the performer "such glorious actable stuff."⁵ So when every theatre owner they approached rejected their Joint Management proposal to produce the Ibsen play, no time seemed more dismal, no two actresses more determined to change their circumstances. Robins recalled: "We arraigned the managers, we raged, dreamed, and then more or less awake, began to consider ways and means."⁶ They talked of plans to stage other plays besides Ibsen's – England's earlier poetic drama, and a new translation of *Antigone* – but Ibsen still whispered to them. A revival of *Pillars of Society* might have engaged them, but that project never materialized. For lack of something more ambitious, Robins accepted the

offer to play Mrs. Linde in Marie Fraser's single matinee revival of *A Doll's House*, scheduled for 27 January.

Then Robins and Lea heard that in Copenhagen, Ibsen's newest play, one with a woman's name for its title, had just been printed. Eagerly they asked for news. J.T. Grein, the Dutchman whom they thought most in touch with the European stage, knew nothing. "*Hedda Gabbler* – it sounded unpleasing,"⁷ Robins recalled, mispronouncing her name as so many would continue to do. Still, they wondered, *was* this a woman's play? Was it a play for their Joint Management?

Rumors of a clash over the English rights to this play made the two actresses more curious. They learned that William Archer, the long established counselor to any Ibsen project in London, was "out of it." Walter Scott, the publisher of Archer's multivolume edition of *Ibsen's Prose Dramas*, had been announcing for weeks that Volume Five would contain Archer's translation of Ibsen's latest play. But a newly established publisher, Heinemann, had discovered that, as a result of the Bern International Copyright Regulations, he could secure not just first but *exclusive* rights to both the English printed translation and the English stage production. Heinemann had offered Ibsen the sizable sum of £150 for the privilege, then secured the distinguished man of letters Gosse to do the translation. In looking for a way to advertise his fledgling business, publisher Heinemann had seized on the growing interest in Ibsen. Unfortunately, he was not a good judge of Gosse's ability to translate Norwegian. Archer was incensed, not merely because his own translation could not now be printed, but because Gosse had mangled all sense of the original.

Nevertheless, Robins counted it a "great moment" when in mid-January Lea brought her "the earliest obtainable copy of Mr. Gosse's *Hedda*. ... We fell upon it with unforgettable eagerness. We read with jeers, we rolled with irreverent laughter; then brought up short by a thrust at our vitals from the Ibsen rapier, blinked, stared at each other and ended in a state of demoralized excitement."⁸ Two resolutions emerged from their first exuberant reactions. Lea declared "Here was Our Play,"⁹ sure that Robins was *Hedda*, and seeing so much in Thea Elvsted for herself that Robins began to believe her. Both actresses were sure, too, of the need to alter the language to make Ibsen more speakable. Uncertain of whom they should approach first among the translation claimants, Robins herself began to study the original Norwegian and to rewrite *Hedda's* speeches. And she also became convinced *Hedda* was her part: "I found myself coming close and closer till I had *Hedda* in my bones. But this was between *Hedda* and me."¹⁰

New complications arose. Robins learned that Heinemann had awarded stage rights to Justin Huntly McCarthy, a well-established journalist who had a new plan for a Sunday evening theatre. He proposed to stage an adapted version, possibly starring Mrs. Lily Langtry, the illustrious socialite who had taken up acting to please the Prince of Wales. Mrs. Langtry would ruin Ibsen's

Hedda, Robins feared, or McCarthy would destroy the play with a cheap, Anglicized adaptation.

Even worse, Robins worried that Hedda would never make it to the stage, for in a front-page article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on January 23rd, Archer accused Gosse of behaving as a "Translator-Traitor." He charged that Gosse's translation was the exercise of a "fourth-form school-boy" and listed many of Gosse's hopelessly wrong, awkward, silly, and misleading phrases. Hedda's willing destruction of Lövborg's lifework paled in comparison to what Mr. Gosse had done to Ibsen, Archer claimed, for she obtained the manuscript only by chance, "and once possessed of it she did not deface, stultify and publish it and then claim copyright. She only burned it."¹¹ Immediately Gosse fired back his detailed defense. Archer repeated his accusations, and the exchange left Robins feeling that, though Archer's attacks seemed justified, Hedda was a long way from her grasp.

A few days later, on 27 January, Robins's success as Mrs. Linde was assured by reviews which singled out her performance, called upon managers to snatch her up, and gave tribute to the depth of her natural display of emotion – emotion expressed with eyes that were "veritable windows of the soul and one of those voices that brings the listener's heart into his mouth."¹² She wrote in her diary on the night of the performance: "The time has come for me to try to rouse Archer to some interest in my doing *Hedda Gabler*."¹³

But Archer did not give her encouragement. She left her meeting with him the next day "deluged with reason and the cold water of his doubt." He recited for her every uncomfortable part of the dispute. Lawsuits were imminent; Ibsen remained silent. It would be better, Archer was sure, for "some *accredited* and long *established* management" – Tree at the Haymarket or Mrs. Langtry – to produce *Hedda*.¹⁴ Mrs. Langtry again! For Robins, no thought was worse.

Lea diverted Robins from the fear that Archer might endorse Langtry by suggesting that Robins pursue the good favor of Clement Scott, another leading critic who had praised Robins's talent. That interview was hardly successful, for all Robins gained from Scott was his confirmation that she had promise, that "Marion Lea should stick to comedy,"¹⁵ and, more encouragingly, that Mrs. Langtry was a "hopelessly bad actress."¹⁶ Then, without even mentioning the *Hedda Gabler* project, Robins got a sample of Scott's dislike of Ibsen. "Are you an Ibsenite?", Scott queried abruptly. Robins knew what else he meant: a New Woman, a Decadent, anyone who reveled in the collapse of the moral fabric of society. "Scarcely an Ibsenite," she replied, "but very grateful to a dramatist who does the honor of presupposing a little intelligence and imagination on the part of the actor."¹⁷ This was as much as Robins dared to say. She listened while Scott cataloged his objections to Ibsen. In his reviews of her Mrs. Linde, he said she had "roused the whole house to enthusiasm," then qualified that with: "It was worth sitting out hours of Ibsen to get a natural

performance like that.”¹⁸ *Hedda Gabler*, Robins realized, would have to proceed without any endorsement from Scott.

Lea then suggested that she herself approach Archer, but not before they could assure him that they were serious about managing their own production. They recognized the need to secure a theatre, but they had no money. Lea had a jeweled bracelet; Robins had a small but heavy box of unalloyed fire-assay gold. Because the box was a souvenir from her father, Robins recalled that she had “never thought to risk that treasure of many memories on anything not a matter of life and death.” But *Hedda Gabler*, she resolved, was worth that risk.¹⁹ Lea’s sister found an appraiser for the gold; and since their treasures together were security enough for a 300£ loan, the women stood ready to lease the Vaudeville Theatre.

When Lea returned from her private interview with Archer, she reported to Robins with all the glee of an actress who had played her part well. “My get up I think helped,” she wrote to Robins. She had listed for him the arguments on behalf of their new management. Then Lea offered to withdraw her claim to play Thea, if that in any way prevented Archer’s endorsement.²⁰ Archer was won by the women’s earnestness and agreed to write Ibsen on their behalf. But he also suggested in a letter to Robins that perhaps the Joint Management should have plans to produce other plays.

Those contingent plans seemed the only hope for the Joint Management until another disappointment turned into fortunate reversal. Archer learned from Ibsen that Heinemann did indeed control the stage rights. But Archer was so seriously concerned about the correct translation of the play that on 17 February he made a daring suggestion. He wrote to Robins and Lea that they should approach Heinemann directly in order to announce to the publisher that they wanted to do Gosse’s version. They should explain that for the purposes of speaking the lines they would need to make some alterations. Archer then volunteered to assist in the retranslation – provided that Heinemann knew nothing of his involvement. He agreed to let Gosse’s name appear on the playbill as long as he could supervise the translation that was actually used.²¹ Not surprisingly, Archer’s letter completely staggered the two actresses.²² They realized that they were being enlisted as liaisons between Archer, with his wish for an accurate text, and those who held the rights to the play: publisher Heinemann, translator Gosse, and adapter McCarthy. “It was the prelude,” Robins recalled, “to secret diplomacy of a major political crisis.”²³

The women met Heinemann and told him how disadvantageous McCarthy’s single performance of a bowdlerized version would be. The publisher was more than conciliatory. He agreed to encourage McCarthy to talk things over with the actresses; he blamed Archer for deadlocking production efforts. Then Robins and Lea warned that Mr. Gosse made *Hedda* seem “grotesque when she wasn’t dull.”²⁴ Heinemann recognized the advantages of a more playable translation

and promised he would put all his services at their disposal. Outside Heinemann's office, Robins and Lea hugged each other in triumph. But aware that their mission was yet to succeed, they sobered and approached the formidable Gosse.

Again Robins and Lea put their talents to use: they hid their real intentions with flattery and polite earnestness; they listed the advantages of the Vaudeville, a popular theatre in the center of the theatre district. They expressed surprise at any thought of being repelled by Hedda: she was one of the greatest parts ever written. But then, apparently, Mr. Gosse had not had the time to investigate the special demands of the stage, for he had given over the permission for an adaptation to Mr. McCarthy. They asked what Mr. Gosse thought of the adaptation. Would he endorse their request to perform McCarthy's version? Gosse cautioned that he had not yet seen the adaptation. But of course, they inquired, he knew that the adapter's name – not the translator's – appeared on the playbill? If they had their wish, they hinted, they would prefer to do the *Ibsen* play, not something "Adapted for the Stage" by Mr. McCarthy. And if they could perform Mr. Gosse's translation, they would simply like to adjust some dialogue in order to find a less awkward way to speak what Ibsen really meant. Gosse was silent for a long pause. "Fate hung in the balance," Robins remembered. Then, without hesitation, he offered to give the actresses two sets of his page proofs on which to work. They could compare suggested changes; he would be free to object to their suggestions. "And I free to die for mine," Robins signaled to Lea as they thanked him for his generosity.²⁵

From then on, because McCarthy had not begun his adaptation, because Gosse himself recognized the need for changes and silently worked on them, and because Robins and Lea had Archer's clandestine assistance, the new translation evolved smoothly. But, "Oh, the kid-glove handling every one of us, of every other," Robins recalled.²⁶ Archer sent the actresses on repeated rounds to publisher, adapter, translator, and then met with them to supervise the approved changes. Robins remembered "the endless to-ing and fro-ing. Marion and I walked many miles, raced about in occasional hansoms, or crawled in horse-drawn busses."²⁷ Heinemann, still in the dark about Archer, insisted that the posters read "By Special Arrangement with Edmund Gosse and William Heinemann." But those names on the playbill announced only the legal owners of the production version. Robins meanwhile took every advantage of her independent management.

The two actresses secluded themselves in a lodging out of town in order to plan their staging and rehearse their own scenes thoroughly. Two weeks before the first matinee, the full company assembled at the Vaudeville Theatre with all their lines memorized. The actresses granted interviews in order to assist the promotion of the play, and Robins let it be known that *Hedda Gabler* would be one of the most rehearsed plays in London. One reporter noticed with curiosity that Archer, Gosse's late rival, was in attendance. Yes, Robins assured him, he was supervising the staging.²⁸ In fact, he was doing much more, for as

rehearsals continued to improve the playableness of the translation, Robins welcomed collaboration as she tried out and refocused her approach to the role. Every detail was important. She like Archer's suggestion that Hedda's pistols should gleam in the light. The audience must get used to the sight of them, she reasoned.²⁹

The response to the first matinee on 20 April was electric. George Bernard Shaw took the opportunity to introduce himself to Robins. He commended the actress for solving the "central difficulty" of playing Hedda by making her "sympathetically unsympathetic"; and he added: "I never had a more tremendous sensation in a theatre than that which began when everybody saw that the pistol shot was coming at the end."³⁰ Robins heightened the sensation. She took the advice of another observer, and, after the first performance, she never appeared for a final curtain call.³¹ The Ibsen controversy raged. The papers praised her performance and attacked or defended her character. The originally scheduled two weeks of matinees were extended to an evening run that lasted through the month of May. Henry James marked his conversion to Ibsenism with his essay "On the Occasion of *Hedda Gabler*."

Robins was involved in the production of the next Ibsen play from the beginning. Again she helped to translate. Then, despite Archer's warnings that *The Master Builder* was utterly unplayable, she managed her own subscription series and astounded London in February 1893 with her portrayal of Hilde Wangel. Less than four months later, she added two more Ibsen women to her repertory and presented, in the first week of June, two performances each of *Hedda Gabler*, *Rosmersholm*, and a combined bill of *The Master Builder* and Act IV of *Brand*. The matinee series was so successful that Robins repeated the whole cycle in the evenings of the week following. In her pocket diary she recorded her victories. On Monday, Eleonora Duse attended and it went "famously"; on Tuesday, "Thomas Hardy came. *Believed!*"³² Soon afterwards, Duse began performing Ibsen herself. Equally significant, Robins realized her own goal; she became noted for her playing of diverse parts.

Independent productions of *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman* followed in 1896 and 1897. The roles Robins created remain an impressive list. Yet without her initiatives to stage Ibsen, London might have seen his plays distorted by the ambitions of Langtry and McCarthy, by the ineptness of Gosse, or by the likes of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, whose inclinations to distort Ibsen to suit his own purposes constitute another chapter in Robins's struggle to produce Ibsen. But Robins's contribution to the Ibsen movement began with the determined risks she took to stage *Hedda Gabler* accurately. When Archer stepped forward to take his own risks for the same cause, the two initiated a collaborative effort which lasted through the 1890s. Their faithfulness to Ibsen's texts, combined with Robins's initiative to mount productions independent of the commercial actor-manager system, was one of the most important contributions to the Ibsen movement in England.

NOTES

- 1 Edmund Gosse, "Introduction" to the Large Paper Edition of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (London, 1891), p. xiii.
- 2 Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (London, 1928), p. 17.
- 3 Gay Gibson Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: The Genesis of an Independent Manageress," *Theatre Survey*, 21 (November 1980), 145-163. See also her "Discovering Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen," *Theatre Journal*, 35 (March 1983), 5-22; and her dissertation, cited below.
- 4 Elizabeth Robins's papers are at the Fales Collection, New York University Library. The narrative of her efforts to produce *Hedda Gabler* continues from the end of the published autobiography, *Both Sides of the Curtain*, and covers the period from the fall of 1890 to April 1891, when *Hedda Gabler* was about to open. Some of the chapter numbers in this unfinished second volume, "Whither and How," suggest that an earlier draft was to have been added to the thirty-four chapters of *Both Sides*. When a chapter has two different numbers, I have indicated both numbers in the first citation. Roman numerals (in parentheses) indicate the renumbered version. My thanks to Mabel Smith, Chair of Elizabeth Robins Estate, Backsettown, Henfield, Sussex, for permission to quote from unpublished Robins material.
- 5 Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress*, p. 31. My unpublished paper, "The Texts of the First English Translations of *Hedda Gabler*," examines in detail the changes made from Gosse's January translation to the marked-over proofs and from these to the typed side to Hedda's part. Both Robins's page proofs and side are with the Robins papers at New York University.
- 6 Robins, "Whither and How?" (Robins Papers, NYU), Chapter 40, p. 8.
- 7 Ibid., Chapter VII, p. 5.
- 8 Ibid., Chapter 43, p. 8.
- 9 Ibid., p. 9.
- 10 Ibid., p. 12.
- 11 Quoted from *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 January 1891, in Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter 43, pp. 16-17.
- 12 A.B. Walkley, Review of *Hedda Gabler*, *The Spectator*, as quoted in Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter VIII, p. 2.
- 13 As quoted in Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter 44 (VIII), p. 1.
- 14 Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter 44, p. 3.
- 15 Ibid., p. 11.
- 16 Ibid., p. 10.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- 18 Clement Scott, Review of *A Doll's House* in *The Daily Telegraph*, as quoted in Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter VIII, p. 1.
- 19 Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter 45 (IX), p. 4.
- 20 Marion Lea to Elizabeth Robins, as quoted in Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter 45, p. 7.

- 21 William Archer to Elizabeth Robins, 17 February 1891, as quoted in Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter 47 (XI), p. 3.
- 22 Ibid., p. 4.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter XII, p. 1.
- 25 Ibid., p. 6.
- 26 Ibid., p. 10.
- 27 Robins, "Whither and How," Chapter XIV, p. 2.
- 28 Clipping, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 April 1891, in Robins Papers, NYU.
- 29 Robins, "In case of Vol. III," folder No. 10, as noted in Mary Gay Gibson Cima, "Elizabeth Robins: Ibsen Actress-Manageress" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1978), p. 130.
- 30 George Bernard Shaw to Elizabeth Robins, 20 April 1891, in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York, 1965), p. 292.
- 31 The *Topical Times*, in an undated clipping in the Robins scrapbook, NYU Library. Robins notes in the margin: "A man in the gallery objected to my taking a call when I was supposed to be dead. His arguments were so well urged, I refused again to come before the curtain."
- 32 Robins, 1891 Engagement Book, NYU.