WHILE Sarah Grand and George Egerton were dubbed New Women based on their literary careers, Elizabeth Robins (1862–1952) came to be considered an important contributor to the New Woman movement not so much on the basis of her writing, but mostly as an “Ibsen actress.” To the British fin-de-siècle audience, Ibsen, however unwillingly, became the symbol of women’s emancipation. Despite his repeated assertions that he was not particularly interested in feminism but rather in the emancipation of all people as human beings, it was the unusually complex characters of unconventional women that attracted audiences to his plays and gained him popularity in Britain. Starting with Janet Achurch and Charles Charrington’s 1889 staging of *A Doll’s House*, London productions of Ibsen’s plays were attended by enthusiastic women fascinated by the playwright’s representation of women’s struggle for self-realization.

Robins’ name came to be quickly associated with Ibsen after she and Marion Lea, both dissatisfied with the roles available to them in established London theatres dominated by male actor-managers, formed in 1891 a “Joint Management” and staged the first English performance of *Hedda Gabler*. Over the course of her stage career Robins also played Hilde Wangel in *The Master Builder* (1893), Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* (1894), Asta and Rita in *Little Eyolf* (1896), as well as other Ibsen characters. In contrast to the male actor-manager-dominated London theatre
establishment's predilection toward producing only works that showcased conspicuous male protagonist roles, Ibsen's plays provided actresses such as Achurch, Robins, and Lea with fascinating and complex material around which they could organize their opposition and gain experience in trying to create new women's drama. It was through her struggle with the theatre establishment and through her critical engagement with Ibsen's drama that Robins developed from an actress hungry for challenging roles into an acutely politically conscious feminist playwright.

My main objective in this chapter is to assess how Robins placed herself and her work—whether her acting or writing—in relation to fin-de-siècle imperialism and evolutionism as the dominant racially and gender-biased discursive frameworks at the time. Compared to Grand, who for the most part adopted the popular theories of evolution and eugenics (reshaping them for her feminist purposes), Robins' view of late-nineteenth-century science was more complicated. Her mother's history of mental illness, interpreted by Victorian medical authorities in terms of degeneration and as hereditary, problematized Robins' stance on evolutionary discourse, and—although their authority is always ultimately reestablished in her texts—she often used her writing to challenge the determinism of contemporary scientific theories or at least to expose their dismal impact on the late-Victorian individual.

As a woman who suffered from and tried to challenge the authority of the deterministic evolutionary discourse (used by Victorians to justify their cultural supremacy in colonies), and as an American (and thus a citizen of a country which used to be a British colony), one might expect that Robins would have been less invested in the maintenance of global colonialism than were her British contemporaries. Her texts, however, seem to suggest otherwise. Much of her writing represents Robins as an Anglo-Saxonist cultural nationalist, who—similar to Grand—often sought to gain legitimacy for herself as a woman writer by locating her work within the project of Anglo-American colonialism and by reinforcing her readers' dominant perceptions of racial hierarchy.

I examine Robins' more obvious opportunities for rhetorically engaging the colonial narrative in her travelogue Under the Southern Cross and her novel The Open Question, both texts that connect gender, racial, and imperial issues and that place Robins' feminism directly in relation to evolutionary discourse. As well, I explore the perhaps less conspicuous ways in which Robins might have been implicated in fin-de-siècle imperialist social politics. Likewise, I consider Robins' role in the late-nineteenth-century
process of the “domestication” of Victorian theatre—the appropriation of theatre (as an institution potentially threatening the feminine ideal and social status quo) into a self-policing and respectable bourgeois establishment. As a middle-class actress personally invested in combating the prevailing perception of public women as being available to sexual exploitation, Robins participated in this process of bourgeois professionalization of Victorian theatre by parading her respectability. However—and in this, I believe, lies her contribution—she also articulated the social pressures behind her (and her characters’) readiness to embrace the moral etiquette.

In examining the large and varied collection of Robins’ own writing and the growing body of Robins-related criticism, it quickly becomes evident that a simple assessment is neither appropriate nor practical. Debates in contemporary scholarship make this quite apparent. Robins scholars Gay Gibson Cima and Elin Diamond, for instance, while studying the same sources, manage to draw opposing conclusions about Robins’ productions of Ibsen’s plays in relation to how they supported or challenged the modernist tradition of realism. Cima contends that Robins employed Ibsen’s scripts to expose the performative nature of femininity and critique the roles imposed upon Victorian women, and she concludes that Robins frustrated the critics’ attempts at pigeonholing Ibsen’s ambiguous characters. Diamond offers a less favorable appraisal. She argues that Robins did not manage to maintain the subversive ambiguity inscribed into Ibsen’s texts and, instead, collaborated with the Victorian critics’ desire to discursively appropriate his characters into generic types. The implication of Diamond’s argument would be that Robins participated in the modernist ways of interpreting the world through forced appropriation of ambiguities into the binary oppositions of Western discursive frameworks.

While one might campaign for either Cima’s or Diamond’s having arrived at a “stronger reading,” each scholar’s work has its merits. Recognizing their opposing and contradictory messages will perhaps serve as a useful reminder about the dangers entailed in applying modernist strategies for arriving at an unproblematic absolute truth about Robins. In examining several aspects of Robins’ career—her work in introducing Ibsen on the British stage; her own contributions to feminist dramatic writing and theatrical productions; her writing novels, short stories, and travelogue; and her own autobiographical commentary—I am hoping to develop an adequately complex picture of Robins’ position in the history of feminism, of a committed and intellectually passionate woman concerned with the issues of her day.
ISSUES OF RESPECTABILITY IN ROBINS’ ACTING CAREER

As an actress, Robins exemplified the middle-class women who were entering the stage in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the earlier family-based theatre system disintegrated and the acting profession was becoming recognized as a reasonably lucrative option for the growing surplus of single bourgeois women. Robins' financial situation was often precarious, and the hardships she faced upon committing to an acting career (as recorded in her writing) were real. At the same time, the support she received from her wealthier family relatives and the access she had to influential aristocratic and artistic circles provided her with privileges that her less-connected and less-educated working-class colleagues lacked. Equipped with a good education and with supplies of her relatives’ discarded clothes for costumes, Robins was in a better position to survive professionally in the late nineteenth century when the market for actresses became saturated. Considered in the light of Tracy Davis’s study of the acting profession in Victorian Britain, Robins was thus among the privileged middle-class women who—responding to the changing demands of the increasingly bourgeois audiences—flocked onto the established stage, unwittingly pushing working-class actresses (hindered by their slang and working-class manners unpopular with the new respectable audiences) into less profitable and less reputable forms of entertainment.

As Angela John, Robins’ biographer, has pointed out, already during her early career on the American stage, Robins, with her genteel upbringing, felt uncomfortable around the “ballet girls” and carefully distinguished herself from them by her more reserved manners. Conscious of the social stigma connected (especially for women) with the acting profession, Robins strove to escape it by cultivating an image of a respectable ascetic lifestyle. Arriving in London (in 1888) in a carefully maintained costume of a widow’s mourning, engaging a chaperone to accompany her on errands and to the theatre, and avoiding all social occasions potentially discreditable to her reputation, Robins meant to leave no doubt about her social status and propriety. With her practices and strategies, she represented the self-policing middle-class actresses, who, as Mary Jean Corbett has observed, won moral license to perform publicly by parading their feminine virtues, in the process contributing to the embourgeoisement of Victorian theatre—its appropriation into a proper and decent, rather than subversive, bourgeois establishment. The fact that Robins’ family (including her pious grandmother) initially objected to her career choice but
eventually accepted it suggests her success at convincing them of the acting profession’s appropriateness even for the daughters of puritanical background.

If Robins assisted in the process of domestication of Victorian theatre by cultivating her respectability, she also managed to articulate the social pressures underlying her readiness to embrace the prescribed social protocol. Both in her autobiographical Both Sides of the Curtain (a book set and written in 1888 though published as late as 1940) and in her fictional writing, she addresses the issue of the vulnerability of actresses and other independent women who transgress the boundaries between public and private spheres, and the socially condoned tendency among some men to interpret such behavior as an invitation for their sexual propositions. Robins’ texts indicate that for her, as a professional woman, the possibility of sexual assault was a reality and that she was often preoccupied with devising strategies of discouraging this eventuality. The cultivation of social etiquette was recognized and advocated by her as one of the few strategies of resistance available to independent women in Victorian society that tended to put all blame for sexual harassment on the assailed woman.

Explaining how she found some aspects of the social protocol useful in her life and career, Robins promotes its appropriation into a moderate tactic for women’s emancipation:

[M]ine was the problem of the woman bred under the old order who abandons that order, but does not for a moment intend to abandon its more valued advantages. Unconsciously to herself the greatest of these was respect, the outward respect at least, of even the more daring. The limitations imposed by the old order were clear enough. But even in the act of breaking down the more hindering of them, she was subconsciously aware of their uses. They had been framed for Protection. They were protection. Not the: “Sir, you mistake me” or “Unhand me villain”—but the thousand less crude ways of inoffensively conveying:—“You are wasting your time.”

As Robins saw it, one of the functions of the social etiquette was to restrict men’s licentious behavior toward women. This aspect of the moral code, she believed, was worth maintaining, even by those women who otherwise transgressed the traditional roles defined for them by the same code. Reminiscent of the logic of Ruskin’s earlier arguments (articulated in Sesame and Lilies, 1865) about women’s ability to bring harmony and
virtues from the domestic into the public world, Robins maintained that a woman who retains her genteel drawing-room manners in her ventures into the public realm can deploy the protective etiquette to discourage men's sexual propositions. From this position, more radical women's efforts to do away with the moral code (Robins calls it “prunes and prism” or “the Lady Barrier”) were seen as misled, actually serving men's, rather than women's, interests. Finding it impossible to give up her internalized desire to please, Robins realized that Victorian society, which discouraged middle-class women's professional work and condoned sexual harassment of such women, left her with only a limited strategy of resisting the conventional practice of reducing actresses into sexual objects—by means of carefully manipulating the sanctioned (but restrictive) feminine ideal for this purpose.

Of course, this was not a radical strategy and did not subvert (in fact, it reinforced) the restraining feminine ideal as the basis of gendered society. Robins' greater contribution to feminism lies in her decision to break the politically paralyzing silence—to write about issues of sexual assault and other forms of intimidation she and other public women faced. While in her autobiography the references to the dangers posed to women in public spaces remained elliptical and allusive, in her fictional narratives, Robins demonstrated increased comfort in describing sexual intimidation of independent women more fully. A number of her heroines are faced with unsolicited advances from men and find themselves having to improvise ways of dealing with them. Although Robins' early fiction promotes women's manipulation of the social code as the appropriate method of discouraging sexual harassment, it also exposes such strategy as precarious, energy draining, and requiring women's ability to continually reinvent it.

For instance, in Robins' story “The Fatal Gift of Beauty” (1896), Mrs. Tours, a widowed owner of a boardinghouse who is economically dependent upon income generated from her military tenants, finds herself continuously challenged to devise new ways of respectfully discouraging their propositions. However, wearing widow's mourning, avoiding all unnecessary contact with her bachelor lodgers, even taking off her slippers when walking past one of her most persistent tenants' room do not protect her from being in the end physically attacked by him. Similarly, Katharine, the heroine in Robins' novel _A Dark Lantern_ (1905), is misled and abducted by the German prince Anton despite her observance of the social code, and she has to come up with a strategy to avoid being raped. She employs what
Robins on another occasion calls “the Lady Barrier,” which, while eliciting the prince’s disappointed comment that “she is a statue, not a woman” in the end proves effective in shaking him off. Finally, in *Under the Southern Cross* (written in the 1890s, published in 1907), Blanche, a young American traveling by sea from San Francisco to New York, at first deals with her Peruvian copassenger’s unwanted advances by inventing a language barrier. Pretending that she cannot understand any of the languages in which he is fluent, she leaves her infatuated pursuer with his broken English as the only means of communication. In this way, she puts him in a linguistically disadvantaged position and to some extent avoids the more passionate expressions of his feelings, for which his English is insufficiently advanced. However, this tactic fails, and Blanche has to reinvent her method of self-protection. She succeeds in defending herself by calling upon the Peruvian’s masculine sense of honor: “You are not a man when you break your word.”

Women characters in these texts reinforce the Victorian sexual double standard by subscribing to the widespread interpretation of such incidents as being the woman’s fault and by deciding to remain silent about them. Thus although Mrs. Tours eventually turns her most obnoxious lodger out, her decision is deferred by her conventional reasoning that her appearance might be partially accountable for his persistent pursuit of her. The heroine of *A Dark Lantern* similarly subscribes to the belief that women who are sexually assaulted are as responsible as men for these incidents. No woman is raped against her will, she maintains. Katharine, Blanche, and Mrs. Tours are all depicted as feeling obliged to conceal what happened to them, even before their women friends, fearing that they would be blamed for the incidents and that their reputation would suffer. Blanche’s main concern after her close escape from being abducted and raped is to hide the matter from her woman companion: “She mustn’t think there’s been any scene, she would say it was entirely my fault, and she will lose all confidence in me. No! Mrs. Steele must never know!” (*Southern Cross*, 222).

Still, while representing characters who reinforce the status quo by their decision to remain silent, Robins, the author, spoke for them and exposed to the reader both the ways in which the Victorian society made women feel they were not welcome in the public sphere and the silencing pressures this bias imposed on victims of sexual intimidation. More importantly, Robins’ later texts, particularly her suffrage play *Votes for Women* (1907) and its novel version *The Convert* (1907), explicitly rejected the Victorian practice of blaming and silencing the victim, and turned incidents of
women's sexual exploitation into political currency rather than paralyzing guilty secrets.

ISSUES OF HEREDITY AND DEGENERATION IN ROBINS' LIFE AND IN THE OPEN QUESTION

It might be argued that while the late-Victorian narrative of heredity and degeneration tended in the overall sense to be detrimental to the New Woman's desire for self-determination and emancipation, it actually helped to open the option of a professional career to Robins. Hannah Robins, Elizabeth's mother, suffered from persecutory delusions and hallucinations, and Elizabeth's interpretation of these symptoms—informed by the physicians' diagnosis in terms of mental degeneration and reinforced by her father's confidence in contemporary theories of social Darwinism—convinced Elizabeth of the possibility that her mother's condition might be hereditary and that she herself (particularly as the product of a marriage between first cousins) could expect quite possibly to develop similar symptoms. The fact that her mother's hallucinations appeared to be triggered by her frequent pregnancies convinced Elizabeth and her family that a conventional career of a housewife—with its virtually inevitable entailment of pregnancies and child rearing—would be inadvisable for her. Thus while other women of her generation were commonly encouraged to become domestic wives and mothers, Elizabeth, at least to some extent, escaped such pressures. A professional career and a childless life appeared the most prudent options for her specific circumstances, and she managed to keep her acting profession and remain childless even during her brief marriage (1885–87) to a fellow actor, George Parks.9

Hannah Robins' symptoms seem to fit the description of schizophrenia, a condition which is today, much like hysteria, considered by many a symbol of linguistic, religious, and social breakdown and rebellion.10 Victorian psychiatrists favored hereditary explanations of this condition,11 although today there are debates concerning to what extent schizophrenia is a hereditary disease or alternately a disorder caused by social pressures on individuals.12 Elaine Showalter is among the cultural critics who consider symptoms of schizophrenia in women a presymbolic form of expression and who tend to interpret these symptoms in terms of women's struggles with gender roles socially prescribed to them. From this point of view, Hannah Robins' hallucinations and her daughter's writing and acting can be seen as representing two different ways of struggling against conven-
tional women’s domestic roles. Her mother’s schizophrenia, as it hovered as a (presumed) possibility over Elizabeth if she became pregnant, in a way removed some of the obstacles to self-expression and self-realization (particularly the burden of exhausting pregnancies) that Elizabeth might have otherwise faced in her life, thus enabling her to develop more “legitimate” and fulfilling practices of expressing female discontent, such as writing, acting, and public speaking, rather than the presymbolic schizophrenic symptoms.

At the same time as the contingency of mental deterioration (appearing particularly cogent when considered through the prism of late-Victorian evolutionary psychology) enabled Robins to escape the traditional woman’s path, the inadvisability for her of having children confronted Robins (in this period of limited contraception) with dilemmas concerning her sexual life. In her 1898 roman à clef *The Open Question*, which seems at least partly based on Robins’ own experiences, the author explores these predicaments through the story of Val Gano, a woman raised (like Robins herself) in the American Midwest. The novel is driven by Val’s and the narrator’s, arguably ultimately unsuccessful, desire to escape the determinism of the late-Victorian discourse of eugenics. Val finds herself caught between the philosophy of her proud devout grandmother, Sarah Gano, who is convinced of the intellectual superiority of the Gano stock (and who, although unwittingly, encourages Val’s infatuation with her own cousin), and the bleak, scientifically grounded theories of her father, John Gano, who regards his family dismally as a “worn-out race” deserving to die out. Versed in theories of heredity and in contemporary scientific arguments concerning regressive consequences of intermarriages, the character of John Gano (who actually himself married his first cousin) is convinced that the only way to save his daughter from developing consumption (the Gano family disease, represented here as hereditary) is to defer her sexual life. His insistence that her life should be one of physical work and asceticism has, however, little appeal for the sensuous, rebellious Val. She insists on fulfilling her sexual desires and—despite her father’s disapproval of the relationship—decides to marry her cousin Ethan.

The novel’s closure brings little hope of reconciling Val’s insistence on fulfilling her desires with the dogmas of the discourse of heredity, which Val had unwittingly internalized. Although by marrying, she and Ethan rebel against the constraints placed on them by the Victorian scientific discourse, the success of their existential rebellion is problematized by their coming to the conclusion that the only option open to them if they wish to remain in control of their fate is to voluntarily take their own lives before Val gives
birth to their child. Of course, suicide—presented here as the only way out of the determining circle controlled by the laws of the dominant discourse—is only an illusion of a self-determined choice and rather confirms the impossibility of escape. The authority of Victorian science prevails, as the narrative reinforces and disseminates Galton’s eugenics by ultimately asserting that the right to procreate belongs only to the healthy and strong. Still, while the status quo is here in the end reaffirmed, the subversive aspect of Robins’ novel is in its attempt to celebrate a woman’s search for ways to circumvent the seemingly ineluctable scientific laws and in its sympathetic representation of Val’s rejection of the ascetic lifestyle, prescribed to her in the name of duty to the race.

Robins’ novel also exposes the ways in which the scientific theories of heredity worked to reinforce and rationalize the earlier popular forms of racism. The narrative poses Sarah Gano’s and her son’s opinions concerning race and slavery as representing direct opposites—the conservative proslavery vs. the democratic antislavery—but, in actuality, the contrast appears less dramatic than that. A similar racial bias underwrites both of their positions, and beyond their different interpretations of practical social politics, we find two different versions of racism. Sarah Gano’s is the blunt racism of the antebellum days, based on her taken-for-granted assumption of superiority of the whites over black slaves, of the genteel over the “servant-class,” and of the Ganos over everybody else. As she expresses it, “[W]e exact menial services of our inferiors, being of the dominant race” (306). Although she agrees with her distant Boston-based family relatives that slavery is undesirable, her objections to it, as she says, are “almost solely on the score of its evil effects on the superior race” (39).

The opening chapters of the novel, which deal with the family history prior to Val’s birth, portray the American Civil War from the grandmother’s perspective of a “benevolent” and “loved” (as the narrative insists) slave owner, who not only believes in her right to own individuals but is convinced that she is doing her slaves a favor by allowing them to serve in her house. The narrator’s description of the day when Sarah Gano releases her slaves is told entirely from the mistress’s point of view and in no way problematizes her expressed position that slavery was a state desired by and favorable to the blacks. The Gano ex-slaves are portrayed as begging their mistress to keep them in her household, as she tells them, with a barely suppressed tone of vindictiveness, that the war left her with no money for their salaries and insists that they leave. The few minor characters of the Ganos’ slaves and servants depicted in the book are defined only through their relationship to the mistress and her family. No black dissident voices
are invoked, and the slaves are represented as loyal, attached to the Ganos, and fully satisfied with their subservient positions.

Presumably embodying the American democratic attitude, Val's father objects to slavery and to the division between physical and intellectual labor along class lines, and he preaches a new kind of scientific socialism that would give all people an opportunity to pursue physical and mental health. While his philosophy is presented by the narrative as progressive and as more humane than the grandmother's, John Gano is mostly concerned with the consequences of idleness for the whites rather than with the ethical injustice of slavery and of the class system. He blames the past slavery and the present “importation of ignorant debased foreigners” (307) for discouraging the established white American families from taking up physical work, considered by him a necessary precondition of a physically strong stock. It is as the result of the history of slavery and the contemporary surplus of cheap foreign manual labor, he maintains, that the established Americans, including his family, are deteriorating physically and mentally. His racism is evident when he warns Ethan to beware of the presumably scheming servant class, who might “rob” him of his share of physical exercise: “[Servants] will prevent you from doing any part of that work which alone will keep you whole. . . . It's like some cunning artifice practiced by a nimble-witted slave upon an imbecile and cruel master, a slow but certain process of undoing” (329).

John Gano, much like his mother, is thus really mostly preoccupied with the well-being of the white race, which he sees as endangered by the influx of “inferior” racial and ethnic groups. The idea that the Ganos themselves were once immigrants involved in taking this country away from its original settlers is not entertained by John or Ethan Ganos (nor implied by the narrator) when they maintain that foreigners not only steal work and health from the Americans but also “end up working our municipalities too and running our country” (308). Employing Michel Foucault's and Ann Stoler's terminology, the distinction between Sarah Gano's and her son's racism could be seen in terms of differences between the older system of sovereign power, based on unquestioned acceptance of status quo and white supremacy, and the modern system of “biopower,” in which the division of property and power along class, gender, and racial lines is explained by scientific theories. Although he is represented in the novel as the family's liberal, Val's father simply employs late-Victorian scientific theories to rationalize and justify his own racism and xenophobia. His commendable dismissal of the exploitation of foreign labor is overshadowed by his bizarre and paranoid accusations concerning immigrant workers.
Robins’ novel could be read as a nostalgic narrative lamenting the death of the modernist model of homogeneous subjectivity sealed from unwanted outside contaminations. Both Sarah Gano’s and her son’s perceptions of identity invoke the archetype of coherent and fixed white upper-class subject, constructed through a process of consistent segregations from “lower” races and classes. According to the grandmother, the desired purity of the Gano identity can be maintained quite simply by selective breeding within the existing family stock. Within her ideological framework, intermarriages can seal not only the genetic boundaries of the family but also the presumed homogeneity and superiority of their identity. They can serve to maintain a pure family blood lineage and protect the patrician stock from “inferior contaminations” from the multiethnic outside environment. Much like Grand, Robins here follows the tradition of domestic fiction and suggests the marriage plot as a solution to the private dilemmas her characters face when forced to negotiate a multicultural environment that threatens their imagined superior place in racial hierarchy. Also in agreement with conventions of Victorian domestic fiction, Robins further seeks to employ the marriage trope to reconcile socioeconomic problems in the public sphere. In her novel, she relocates the ideological conflicts between the American North and South into a private sphere, where she attempts to reconcile them through the marriage of Ethan (the rich Boston-raised Gano brought up on the values of bourgeois democracy) and Val (the daughter of the patrician but impoverished Southern branch of the Ganos).

The novel is successful in exposing the pressures (with which Robins was well familiar) faced by Victorian women who felt that their decisions and choices concerning their lives and bodies were dictated to them by Galton’s eugenics and other technologies of state control and that they were losing all illusions of self-determination. Compared to Grand’s work, the influence of the deterministic evolutionary discourse on the life of the woman character is here questioned much more adamantly and passionately. Still, similar to Grand, Robins fails to challenge this same discourse in reference to its racial hierarchy. While it is a clash between the opposing ideologies of two successive generations—one of them encouraging Val to fall in love with another Gano, the other one discouraging her from adding yet another intermarriage to the declining family’s history—that drives the young Gano couple to suicide, the supposedly “cunning” lower classes and races, represented as stealing physical agility away from the more established families, are among those blamed by the narrative for the end of this aristocrat among American families.
Quite likely, it was at least partially Robins’ preoccupation with the struggle for self-determination, evident in *The Open Question*, that made Ibsen’s plays fascinating to her. Although throughout the 1890s she was occasionally forced to accept conventional roles in melodramas to support herself, she repeatedly ventured into management to produce new Ibsen plays, some of which she also helped to translate. While many critics have seen Ibsen’s drama—in relation to its focus upon women’s emancipation—as raising challenges to imperialist and evolutionary narratives, Robins’ and other Ibsen actresses’ interpretations of his work serve to illustrate (much like Grand’s work does in a different context) the difficulties in escaping the dominant symbolic discourse from within its official venues. As an Ibsen actress, Robins’ dramatization of women’s struggle with the social duties and gender roles dictated by the late-nineteenth-century bourgeois state deserves consideration in relation to the ideological context of Ibsen’s existentialist challenge to the dominant position of scientific discourse in late-Victorian society.

Many Victorian critics, even if they acknowledged their fascination with productions of Ibsen’s plays, expressed concerns about the influence of the Norwegian playwright and the “Scandinavian school” on the English public, particularly on women. In their reviews, conservative writers such as H. E. M. Stutfield (the critic who had ranked Egerton among the “erotomaniacs”), but also the more liberally minded such as Clement Scott, articulated their apprehension that the popular Scandinavian literature and drama were at least partially accountable for English women’s recent demands for self-realization. “It is all self, self, self!” complained Scott in his review of Janet Achurch’s production of *A Doll’s House*: “This is the ideal woman of the new creed; not a woman who is the fountain of love and forgiveness and charity, not the pattern woman we have admired in our mothers and our sisters, not the model of unselfishness and charity, but a mass of aggregate conceit and self-sufficiency.”

The origins of what these critics called “the Scandinavian doctrine of the ego” have been traced by some scholars to the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, the mid-nineteenth-century Danish existentialist philosopher. While unknown to English-speaking readers until the end of the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard’s existentialism was perhaps the most influential philosophical system in Norway, prior to the Scandinavian “Modern Breakthrough Movement.” While in his “social plays” Ibsen
appears to have considered modern European cultural criticism (including John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*, translated into Danish in 1869) and the current scientific theories of heredity and degeneration, throughout his work he remained strongly influenced by his earlier interest in Kierkegaardian philosophy. Kierkegaard’s idealistic existentialism sprung out of his perhaps questionable anxiety over the increasing influence of the masses and his desire to direct individuals to “real” Christianity. At the same time, Kierkegaard might also be considered as one of the earliest philosophers who recognized and opposed the deployment of scientific knowledge for the purposes of bourgeois state control over individual lives. Already in the 1840s and 1850s, several decades before Nietzsche, Kierkegaard attacked Hegel’s philosophical system, in which individuals were expected to identify with a larger national group and to adopt prescribed social duties. According to Kierkegaard, such philosophy—rooted as it was in the Enlightenment’s faith in the omnipotence of social sciences to illuminate and solve problems of humanity—threatened to replace the society of unique men and women responsible for their own self-development with a model of mass society in which the individual would disappear behind alienating social roles. The Kierkegaardian (today rather old-fashioned) concept of the autonomous self-determined subject, perhaps to some extent socially constructed yet capable of resisting external controls, understandably constituted an attractive alternative to people living in the period of the social sciences’ increasing insistence on determining life choices for individuals. While twentieth-century feminists vary in their assessment of Kierkegaard, his thesis that self-realization and self-determination are every person’s rights and obligations and that individuals need to dissociate themselves from the roles and duties prescribed to them by the bourgeois state was what most likely attracted the numerous mid-nineteenth-century Scandinavian women (including Ibsen’s wife and mother-in-law) to his philosophy. If Kierkegaard’s views were already perceived as liberating in Scandinavia prior to the wider dissemination of the biological determinism of Darwinian hereditary theories, when—through Ibsen’s modernized reinterpretation—they reached the fin-de-siècle English society, whose technologies of state control were even more sophisticated and internalized (as documented in Robins’ *The Open Question*), their effect was galvanizing.

The internal subjective conflict of Ibsen’s “modern tragic hero,” which through the hero’s action drives the dramatic narrative, may perhaps be perceived as derived from the following Kierkegaardian model of the self: “Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the
eternal, of freedom and necessity. . ."19 Using the internal tension inscribed into this model, Ibsen dramatized the modern individual’s struggle to achieve the ideal condition for the development of one’s self—an equilibrium between the possibility (the ideal) and the necessity (the finite body). He employed the popular discourses of heredity and degeneration and the Victorian ideology of gender roles to expose how their internalization paralyzed the individual’s ability to make decisions and hindered his or her self-development. While doing so, Ibsen managed to express the dilemmas accompanying the late-Victorian middle-class women’s struggles for self-realization, which were hampered by the widely popularized determinism of antifeminist scientific psychological theories. Weighed against the dominant evolutionary rhetoric, Ibsen’s contribution might thus be seen in his dramatization of the struggle of an individual to maintain a sense of self-determination and control over her or his life in a social context dominated by deterministic and essentializing social scientific theories, which facilitated systematic state control of social categories and individuals alike.

The language of degeneration that Ibsen’s critics often employed to discuss and dismiss his plays suggests their anxiety about how the new model of self-determination (popularized in these plays) might affect the future of European civilizations and, more specifically, the English nation. English reviews of Ibsen’s productions abounded with remarks concerning his characters’ nervousness and anxiety, interpreted by most critics as signs of mental degeneration.20 In Max Nordau’s notorious Degeneration (widely read in Britain), the Austrian-Hungarian writer slandered Ibsen’s realism as derived from “the society of a hideous hole on the Norwegian coast, composed of drunkards and silly louts, of idiots and crazed hysterical geese.”21 Nordau’s characteristically paranoid tone exposes his racially motivated anxiety over the influence of what he considered as an inferior provincial culture over European cultural empires. He attributed Ibsen’s women characters’ hysteria (as he saw it) to the author’s own mental instability and maintained that Ibsen’s plays worked to infect audiences with morbid and hysterical ideas that might bring about a regression of “advanced” societies. As a faithful follower of Nordau, Stutfield similarly warned British audiences against Ibsen and reproached English writers for favoring French and Norwegian literary models over their own “solid” literary tradition.22 Even reviewers favorable to Ibsen often communicated their prejudiced concerns over the cultural origins of the new ideology of self-realization, whether indirectly through references to Ibsen’s provinciality and suburban taste, or more explicitly in their comments on the “inexpensive race” of Ibsen’s characters. For instance, in his generally commendatory review of Robins’
production of *Hedda Gabler*, her compatriot Henry James commented: “His people are of inexpensive race . . . even when they are furiously nervous and, like Hedda, more than sufficiently fastidious, we recognize that they live, with their remarkable creator, in a world in which selection has no great range.”

Related to the critics’ favorite remarks concerning the presumed “insanity” of Ibsen’s characters were their comments regarding the perceived incomprehensibility of the characters’ motives and the elusiveness of the texts. The ambiguity of Ibsen’s texts became both a subject of complaints and a source of fascination. As Diamond has observed, most critics were frustrated with the indirectness of Ibsen’s mode of communication, but, at the same time, even those unfavorable to the playwright often expressed a sense of unexpected excitement, facilitated by the kind of intense search for signification that his plays required of them. Cima explains the new perception of perplexing and fascinating indecisiveness invoked by Ibsen’s plays as resulting from the playwright’s dramaturgical innovations. Ibsen changed the traditional structure of dramatic plan and focused on the final stage of the tragedy rather than on its development. Instead of providing the spectators with explanations of characters’ behavior, his plays often left their motives elusive (until the closure), thus encouraging audiences to follow the dialogue closely, watch the performers’ gestures, and develop their own hypotheses.

Disclosive ambiguity is a favorite post-modernist strategy of challenging the positivist insistence on absolute (and supposedly objective, impartial) truth (which, in fact, tends to be partial to the ideologies of dominant discourses) with a sense of relativity and fluidity. If the modernist philosophical tradition endeavors to find and describe order in social experience, Ibsen’s predilection for insidious ambiguity eludes such totalizing gestures. The ambiguous perception that Ibsen sought to invoke in his drama is comparable with Kierkegaard’s “indirect communication,” developed by the philosopher as an expression of his resistance to the Enlightenment infatuation with scientific conceptual knowledge. As Howard Tuttle explains, Kierkegaard dismissed the supremacy of “objective truth” as a property of natural and social sciences and instead promoted “subjective truth” as a matter of each individual’s experience. Subjective truth, he maintained, is not communicable directly through language because such communication would translate the particular and unique experience into generalized knowledge. Writing in the form of dialogues between various dramatic personages representing different points of view, experimenting with ambiguous and poetic language and allusions, Kierkegaard worked to
develop modes of indirect communication that would not seek to convey directly conceptual knowledge but rather work to "deceive" the reader into discovering his or her truth through the process of reading and interpreting. Ibsen in his own writing developed similar strategies of communication. Such elusive ways of expression were likely to frustrate and intimidate Victorian critics’ perceptions of the world as interpretable only from a fixed position (inhabited by themselves).

Beyond the questions of Ibsen's intentions, questions about Robins' interpretations (as the primary purveyor of his work on the British stage) figure prominently in any assessment of fin-de-siècle appraisals of Ibsen's work. Contemporary critics continue to argue over whether Robins succeeded or failed in creating an acting style that would maintain the sense of ambiguity inscribed into Ibsen's texts. Cima and, more recently, Diamond, who have both examined this question, arrive at contradictory conclusions. Cima suggests that Robins recognized the openness of Ibsen's texts to more than a single interpretation and approach and that in her performances, she contributed to upsetting the dominant system of modernist meaning-production and frustrated the critics' attempts at forcing Ibsen's polysemous characters into established types.27

Diamond, on the other hand, concludes that Robins collaborated with, and helped to satisfy, the desire of her spectators/critics to stamp a definite meaning on Ibsen's elusive characters, appropriate their undecidness, and transform them into generic types. Diamond's essay is an enlightening analysis of the parallels among the Victorian spectator, the modern psychoanalyst, and the positivist philosopher, all of whom she perceives as driven by the same desire to appropriate the unknown and ambiguous into simplified compartments of the dominant teleological discourse. She likens the exaggerated gestures employed by the character of the "fallen woman" in (pre-Ibsenite) Victorian melodramas to the gestures of early hysterical patients, who baffled their physicians' attempts to determine the etiology of their hysteria and to translate their symptoms into the language of medical science. The typical woman character in Ibsen's realist plays, Diamond suggests, might be viewed as the fallen woman from earlier melodramas who, however, now divulges the key to her hysterical behavior. In Ibsen's confessional scenes, the woman articulates (through allusions and gestures) her past sins-traumas to the authority figure represented by the spectator/critic/psychoanalyst, satisfying the spectators' thirst for absolute truth while also keeping their interest by postponing her final confession.

Perhaps Diamond’s most significant contribution is her insight concerning the part played by realist actresses and some hysterical patients in
their own appropriation by the symbolic system—their unintentional collaboration with doctors and critics and their consequent assistance in reinforcing the institutionalized status quo. While the actress in melodrama was transformed into a sexual object by the way her body was presented on the stage, the actress in Ibsenite realism, Diamond suggests, sexualized her discourse by presenting herself as an enigma, offering clues to her own unlocking (unveiling), deferring the revelation of the (naked) truth, and finally succumbing to the spectator's gaze and desire to interpret/appropriate. Applying Foucault's observation about Western societies' fascination with confession and his arguments about the affinity between truth, pleasurable confession, sex, and relations of power, Diamond contends that the new Ibsenite theatre gained its legitimacy by deploying this affinity: by inviting the (male) figures of cultural authority to witness the sexualized (female) hysteric's confession, decipher her enigma according to their own desires, and trivialize her language by interpreting it as irrational and insane.

My analysis of the ideological frameworks that informed Ibsen's plays (recognized by most Victorian critics as posing an existentialist threat to the social basis of the English nation) would suggest that as a successful Ibsen actress, Robins challenged the dominant evolutionary discourse. Diamond's exploration of Robins' histrionic interpretative strategies, however, problematizes such conclusions. She grants that, as a text, Hedda Gabler, the Ibsen play that made Robins famous, is an ambiguous work that refuses to provide any definite insight into the etiology of Hedda's behavior. However, with Robins' self-conscious acting, preceded by a careful analysis of the character's motivation, Diamond argues that the actress in effect transformed the ambiguous Hedda into a character type, nullifying her potent and frustrating undecidability and offering the domesticated Hedda as an object for the spectator's consumption through a voyeuristically pleasurable gaze. "Robins translated Hedda," Diamond writes, "enabling the critic/spectator to take on the role of spectator/analyst, gathering clues (the pistols, the portrait, the thinning hair), and to trace the outline of a 'mental pathology' ... filling in the gaps which the play leaves ambiguous." It would seem to follow from Diamond's analysis that when placed in the position of the interpreting subject of Ibsen's elusive texts, which teased the interpreter with their secrets, Robins emulated the typical modernist method of constituting knowledge by means of absorbing (colonizing) the unknown and ambiguous into a less unsettling sameness. As Robert Young has argued, this process of knowledge-production, in which "the same produces all knowledge by appropriating
the other within itself," is implicated in the history of Western colonization.

Given the ephemeral nature of acting, it might be futile to seek any definite answer to the question of how accountable Robins’ acting was for the critics’ appropriation of Ibsen’s elusiveness into established terms of the medical discourse of degeneration, and to what extent this was a result of the Victorian critics’ inability to maintain ambiguity presented to them. Robins did expressly object to the critics’ interpretations of her roles in Ibsen’s plays, commenting that they could hardly be expected to understand Ibsen’s women characters since they did not even understand the women in their own lives. One conclusion that can be made about Robins’ productions of Ibsen’s plays is that her experience with these performances and their (as she saw it) misinterpretations by critics suggested to her that in Victorian society, where the positions of interpretation were occupied mostly by men, expressions by women that diverged from the recognized character types were prone to be misapprehended and likely to be misrepresented as “insane.” It is quite likely that with Robins’ own family medical history, the diagnosis of insanity, so frequently stamped on her Ibsen characters by reviewers, would have been taken as implying an undesirable loss of control over one’s fate. An analysis of Robins’ writing and acting career thus raises questions concerning the availability and practicability of disclosive ambiguity as a writing/acting strategy for women in Victorian society. The development of her writing suggests Robins’ growing conviction that while ambiguity might have subversive powers, in her time it was not necessarily the best option available for women who wished to have their political agenda heard. As long as the system of meaning-production is controlled by male authorities, invested in the maintenance of the existing gender relations and status quo, women’s use of ambiguity comes with a heightened possibility of being misconstrued and trivialized as irrationality or madness. In her own playwriting and political activism, Robins appears to have been much preoccupied with devising strategies that would reduce the vulnerability of her women characters to critical misinterpretation, particularly to their being misread as insane.

EXPERIMENTATION WITH STRATEGIES OF WOMEN’S SELF-EXPRESSION IN ROBINS’ PLAYWRITING

Robins was certainly aware of the seductive effects of dramatic ambiguity. Flaunting a mystery before the audience’s eyes and positioning the key to
the riddle within a woman character, who then manipulates and suspends its disclosure through her confession (and is sexualized and objectified in the process), proved effective ways of capturing an audience's attention. Robins certainly makes use of these lessons in her own work. As one of the male characters in her story “Monica’s Village” expresses it, “[E]very woman is a sorceress who does n’t [sic] too diligently explain away her mystery.” Still, although assured by men that women’s power lies in the deferral of their self-expression and self-interpretation, and although as an Ibsen actress Robins herself experienced the excitement of holding her audiences’ attention by suspending the disclosure of her character’s motives, her writing suggests her growing conviction that women need to enforce their own self-interpretation.

As I have suggested, in her own life Robins appears to have been anxious to assert sovereignty over her self-interpretation and self-determination. Her biographers have recorded Robins’ uneasiness about the prospect of one day becoming a powerless object in the hands of her future interpreters, of being left at the mercy of their desire for knowledge. Robins’ numerous comments concerning her “constitutional unwillingness to letting people know what seems to myself to be the real ‘me,’” while attesting to her implication in the modernist belief in truth, suggest a heightened awareness on her part of the objectifying effects of positivist interpretation and her unwillingness to be subjected to it. Her diligently kept diaries and her practice (recorded with sometimes barely suppressed sense of irritation by her biographers) of carefully weeding out select sections indicate Robins’ insistence on being an agent actively involved in constructing knowledge about herself rather than merely a passive object of her own story.

Women’s right and obligation to develop ways of self-articulation and assert their self-interpretation constitute perhaps the most consistently reappearing issue in Robins’ writing. In her essay “Woman’s Secret” (1905), Robins implores women to express their own opinion and exposes the connection between women’s oppression and their lack of opportunities to articulate their desires and demands. “All that is not silence is the voice of man,” Robins observes. She goes on to emphasize the necessity of women’s speaking for themselves: “If I were one of the ‘dominant sex,’ I think I would not be so sure, as many good men seem to be, that they are competent to speak for women” (4). Robins’ strategies for breaking women’s silence included her campaigning for women’s political rights and for their representation in the institutions in control of interpretation and knowledge construction (she financially supported several female medical
students), as well as her efforts to create fictional and dramatic women characters who would successfully express themselves without being objectified. While some of Robins’ texts emulate the Ibsenite confessional style, in the course of her writing career Robins moved from utilizing the rather politically paralyzing confessional motif to a more aggressive confrontational style.

“The Mirkwater,” Robins’ manuscript play written in the mid-1890s, is perhaps the most consistent example of her use of the Ibsenite retrospective and confessional structure, of her manipulation of the seductive powers of a female character’s suspended confession before a male authority figure, and of a resulting objectification of women. The play raises and explores essential ethical issues concerning a woman’s right to refuse to “confess” her symptoms and to resist the objectifying gaze of the medical establishment. Even so, the narrative reinforces the right of the male-dominated medical establishment to interpret people’s behavior by focusing on that woman character who does collaborate with the local doctor. The subversive character, Mary Vincent, who threatens the scientific authority by refusing to be subjected to Doctor James Theobald’s interpretive gaze, is kept safely off the stage. Instead of giving her an opportunity to speak for herself and to be in charge of her story’s interpretation (as Robins wished to be in her own life), the author surrenders Mary to the fate she herself dreaded. Mary’s breast cancer is appropriated by her sister, Felicia, into a “guilty secret,” with its interpretation becoming a matter of ill-informed public discourse and, in the end, precipitant of Felicia’s confession. Transformed into Felicia’s mystery, Mary’s disease and death serve as an instrument manipulated by the author to maintain the audience’s attention, to construct Felicia’s subjectivity as multilayered (around Mary’s secret), and to awaken the doctor’s fascination with her.

The action of the play is driven by the doctor’s desire to induce Felicia to break the silence and confess the secret (shrouding her sister’s death); to purge herself of the subversive part of her personality and become the tamed and cooperative type of woman appropriate for a country doctor’s wife. The process of Felicia’s domestication turns on the eventual redescription of the initially elusive and subversive character of Mary into a medical type: the symptoms of her disease impressed onto her body are dragged before the eyes of the medical authority she herself distrusted, and her initially inexplicable behavior is translated into the language of science that she resisted. The decay (her cancer and the physical decay her dead body undergoes in the waters of the Mirkwater) embodied in this subversive woman must be submitted to the interpretive gaze of Victorian science.
Inscribed into this play is Robins’ anxiety, characteristic of her work at that time, over the inevitable eventual loss of authority to interpret one’s actions, when, after death, the self becomes ultimately reduced to a mere artifact in a publicly owned discourse, entirely vulnerable to discursive manipulations by others. Perhaps because of her husband’s suicide, which she herself wished to consider as a matter of rational personal choice, Robins had a stake in challenging the verdict of insanity usually assigned to such acts. In her work in the 1890s, she portrays numerous characters who decide to take their lives and seeks ways of eliminating misapprehensions about their decisions. Mary Vincent, Val Gano, Jean Creyke (Alan’s Wife)—all characters who, in the face of their unsolvable dilemmas (which all concern some sort of “physical defectiveness”—breast cancer, consumption, deformity), choose death—either directly explain their motives or have other women characters speak on their behalf to affirm the rationality of their acts. What changes from one work to the next is the extent to which the assumed right of male authorities (whether scientific or legal) to investigate and interpret the world for others is challenged. “The Mirkwater” ultimately confirms the right to facilitate confession and construct knowledge as men’s privilege. When James’ mother attempts to imitate the interpretive methods of the men around her and lead the investigation of Felicia’s mysterious behavior, she is censured by the narrative for trespassing into men’s territory. With this conclusion, the play might be read as a warning against the presumably disastrous effects of a laywoman’s intrusion into the profession of interrogation and interpretation, recognized here as requiring special skills presumably unavailable to women. Still, the control that Victorian medical and legal authorities customarily assumed over women’s bodies, and the authority of late-Victorian scientific discourse, are also successfully challenged in the course of the play through the character of Mary, with whom we cannot help empathizing, however absent and vilified she is in the narrative.

In “The Silver Lotus”—another manuscript play by Robins from the mid-1890s that follows the Ibsenite retrospective structure—male authority is resisted more insistently and overtly, and Mr. Gervais’ ability to interpret his wife’s erratic behavior is questioned directly on the stage by both his wife, Eleanor, and Dwyer, her colonial servant. Eleanor’s behavior—described in stage directions as hectic, artificially gay, restless, and emotional—would fit Diamond’s characterization of the hysterized women in Ibsen’s plays. After Eleanor’s secret alcoholism has been revealed to the audience as the driving force behind her mysterious behavior, various popular etiologies of her addiction are advanced, including heredity
(the theory suggested by Gervais’ mother) and grief after her lost children (the explanation held by Gervais). However, although Gervais’ and his mother’s theories are contemplated and accepted as likely to be at least partially accurate, it is the servant Dwyer’s explanation (and she serves as Eleanor's mouthpiece) that her mistress is insecure in her marriage because of her husband’s waning care for her that is presented by the narrative as the authoritative interpretation. Anticipating Jean Rhys' *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Robins here retells the story of a Bertha Mason-ish colonial-born woman (Eleanor is from Australia), advancing as authoritative Eleanor’s own interpretation of her behavior that defies the husband’s dismissal of her as irrational.

Although at first it is Eleanor’s behavior that is being dissected by other characters and the audience, in the final confrontation between her and Gervais (whose profession is, appropriately, the law), Eleanor turns the table, becoming herself the prosecuting/analyzing figure and interpreting the (whether conscious or unconscious) motives behind her husband's dubious behavior toward her. Mimicking the contemporary male psychologists and legal prosecutors in their treatment of female hysterical patients and lawbreakers, Eleanor refuses to pay attention to her husband’s “no” and confronts him with her interpretation of his motives, which she sees as lying in his infatuation with Camilla (their neighbor). She makes Gervais experience the impotent feeling—more commonly experienced by nineteenth-century women patients, actresses on the Victorian stage, and by the still-close-to-rightless late-Victorian women at court—of being stripped of agency, of having no opportunity to counter other people’s interpretations imposed upon him.

While Robins’ insistence on women’s abilities of interpretation in this play is commendable, her choice of hostile rivalry between two women over a man’s affections as a way of illustrating this faculty seems questionable from a feminist perspective. Eleanor’s representations of herself and Camilla might be seen as reinforcing the tired Victorian madonna/fallen woman dualism. In a dialogue with her husband, Eleanor articulates her perception of how Gervais sees her and Camilla:

ELEA: I suppose you’ll swear too she hasn’t all the virtues? You’ll say she isn’t gentle and strong, full of tact, helpful, clever—beautiful—Ugh!!

... How I’ve come to hate her perfectly ordered, sinless nature.

. . .

GERV: Can’t you see I love you?

- 113 -
ELEA: I can see that your memory of me is stained—hideously indelibly stained—and Camilla's white like snow.37

On the level of literal meaning, Robins here depicts an antagonistic relationship between two women who represent the two most common Victorian stereotypes of womanhood. However, with Camilla being portrayed as the epitome of femininity, the play might be open to another interpretation—as a narrative of Eleanor's unsuccessful struggle with the model of feminine patience and constraint, embodied by Camilla and favored by her husband. Gervais' discussions with his mother suggest that he measures his wife against the conventional model of a self-policing woman who performs femininity to perfection and suppresses her emotions and desires. It is the pressure of being measured up against this standard, which she cannot live up to and which seems to pursue her everywhere she goes, that drives Eleanor to alcoholism and death—that brings about her deterioration.

Eleanor's addiction is represented by her husband in the language of evolutionary regression. Describing the changes in her personality he has been observing, Gervais says to Eleanor: “I have stood by . . . watching the change that was coming over your nature, the horrible, intangible weakening of the moral fiber, the decay of your old pride” (II:15). If Eleanor’s condition is portrayed by Gervais in terms of degeneration, she herself uses the terminology of contagion and contamination when referring to the feminine ideal. Eleanor speaks of Camilla (“the perfect woman”) as “the poison in the air,” fever, disease, and infection (II:38). In a move reminiscent of Egerton’s discursive strategies in “The Spell of the White Elf,” the model of feminine behavior is here represented as a sort of contagious malady, as an effective tool of worsening Eleanor’s decay. On the symbolic level, “The Silver Lotus” thus might be seen as invoking the evolutionary discourse in order to subvert the feminine ideal and expose it as aiding in the process of degeneration of a woman’s identity.

While whether Eleanor’s death should be considered a suicide, accident, or even a murder is left open, Robins’ fear of being misinterpreted asserts itself, and she sends Dwyer on the stage in the last act to confront her ex-master with his share of responsibility for his wife’s death. “I must be eyes and ears and tongue for her now she’s helpless and forgotten” (III:10), she explains her mission, expressing simultaneously her loyalty to her mistress as going beyond the grave. Dwyer—who is meant to embody a stereotypical image of a colonial servant (being described in stage directions as an “oldish woman, thick-set, unintelligent but determined-
looking” (I:1) and by Gervais as “a colonial of some sort” (I:22))—might be seen as a rare example of a stage representation of a subaltern character in the position of a subversive agent. She speaks for her mistress as well as for herself, confronting Gervais with her scathing criticism of his practices as harmful and unjust both to his wife and to his lifelong servant. Robins commendably chose to express this voice of resistance through a representative of the colonized and to recognize this voice as authoritative. Not only does Dwyer express her opinion and confront Gervais, but the legitimacy of her interpretation is confirmed by the play. Of course, Dwyer is sent on the stage with the primary purpose of speaking for and avenging her mistress, rather than to express the discontent and demands of subaltern people. With her attachment to Eleanor, Dwyer represents yet another figure in Robins’ gallery of loyal servants. She certainly appears more concerned about her mistress's well-being than her mistress is about hers. Eleanor’s readiness to give her servant/surrogate mother up in exchange for her husband’s promise of renewed affections and trust suggests the nonreciprocity of this loyalty. Still, while not forgetting that Dwyer is lent a voice with the specific purpose of being a mouthpiece for her white mistress, might we interpret Dwyer’s actions as to some extent vindicating not only British middle-class wives but also the exploited and usually silenced native servants? While in traditional Victorian narratives it is the white master who to a great extent determines the native servants’ stories and fate, Robins’ manuscript play represents in Dwyer a strong aboriginal woman character who appears to have more insight into her mistress’s feelings than does her own husband. She is not intimidated by her master, and her intervention actually affects his future life. This play, unfortunately never produced, may in fact be Robins’ most successful text in terms of its representation of a colonial woman servant and a middle-class wife’s joint effort to challenge the authority of the Victorian patriarchal establishment over their lives.

Unlike “The Mirkwater” and “The Silver Lotus,” which did not find their way onto the fin-de-siècle stage, Alan’s Wife—Robins and Florence Bell’s play about infanticide based on a story by the Norwegian writer Elin Ameen—was produced anonymously in 1893 by J. T. Grein’s Independent Theatre, with Robins playing the lead. Set in a village in Northern England, the play dramatizes Jean Creyke’s existentialist challenge to the church morality of compromise, asceticism, and fear prevalent in her community. Even after being “punished” (through the death of her much-cherished husband and the birth of a crippled son) for her proud and unashamed Nietzschean delight in sensuality, Jean refuses to give up her value system
and continues to reject the religious fatalism of her neighbors. Robins and Bell created in Jean a character of a daring woman who insists on self-determination and follows her desires without succumbing to feelings of shame or guilt. However, compared to Egerton, who in her writing similarly celebrated Nietzschean individualism but who liked to emphasize the positive side of Nietzsche’s philosophy (invoking it to speak for those cast out from the official society dominated by Christian asceticism), *Alan’s Wife* ultimately rather confirms (with Jean killing her son because he is crippled) the exclusivist side of Nietzsche’s philosophy (which coincides with the Darwinian postulate of the survival of the fittest). The play thus incidentally exposes to us the Nietzschean philosophy’s potential racist application to justify the annihilation of those who would not fit its requirements.

*Alan’s Wife* has been celebrated by the feminist critics Catherine Wiley38 and Diamond as a play that overcomes the Ibsenite confessional retrospective style. Both scholars focus on the last scene of the play, in which Jean’s lines are written in the script and thus are available to the actor and reader but, on the stage, are supposed to be silently mimed. They commend this scene as an example of a subversive replacement of the symbolic discourse with a semiotic mode of expression. Diamond persuasively argues that “[c]ollapsing the semiotic distinction between authorial stage direction and Jean’s speech (here neither is spoken), Robins and Bell not only subvert the conventions of realist texts, they insist on the untranslatability of a woman’s (body) language before the law. . . .”39 Jean’s mimed responses, she points out, might be seen in terms of Robins’ break away from the objectifying Ibsenite tradition of heroines who submit to the authority figures’ interrogation, confess, and repent, thus validating the dominant values and interpretations. The resistant silence blocks misinterpretations of Jean’s motives by authorities who control the symbolic, and it is thus employed as a strategy of evading the authorized truth.

Nevertheless, while Robins in this play certainly appears at first preoccupied with maintaining ambiguity about Jean’s motives, her ultimate concern seems to be—as in her other writing—to carve out a space for Jean within the symbolic so that she can figure as a self-defining and self-expressing symbolic subject and can assert her subjective truth, which is also, in this case, the truth of the Darwinian evolutionary discourse. The nonverbal scene is eventually followed by Jean’s verbal explanation of her action, illustrating Robins’ characteristic anxiety over the limitations of presymbolic communication—over the possibility of misapprehension of the ambiguity of Jean’s silent gestures by the spectators. Jean insists on her
right for self-determination, her right to choose and base her actions upon “her own” value system. The values Jean upholds—her extreme worship of physical strength and health—however, are not “her own” but rather follow the popular Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest. Since, as Wiley has also pointed out in her essay, many of Robins’ London spectators quite likely subscribed to the assumption that the function of the English country people was to supply injections of healthy “stock” to the English population, Jean’s celebration of physical health to the point of killing her crippled son, while seriously challenging their perception of the maternal instinct, actually probably also mirrored the eugenicist convictions of a large portion of her middle-class audience.

Although Robins’ next play, Votes for Women, does not technically belong in the New Woman period (since it was written and produced in 1907 as a platform for British women’s suffrage), it pertinently illustrates the author’s growing awareness of the political potentials of theatre and links the more assertively political women’s suffrage movement directly to the earlier, more timid New Woman movement. The play demonstrated to British women in the 1900s how to transform the individual sexual and professional concerns of the New Woman into a political agenda. While an individual woman’s existential rights are still at the center of this play’s attention, the previous strategy of a solitary woman’s struggle to have her individual rights secured and recognized—portrayed in Alan’s Wife, “The Mirkwater,” and “The Silver Lotus”—is here incorporated into a collective women’s struggle for political rights. The central issues dramatized recurrently in Robins’ previous plays—the anxiety over the possible misapprehension of one’s motives and the struggle to assert one’s self-determination and self-interpretation—are here subjected to an explicitly political goal: popularization of women’s suffrage movement.

The main character, a suffrage activist Vida Levering—described in stage directions as “an attractive, essentially feminine, and rather ‘smart’ woman of thirty-two, with a somewhat foreign grace; the kind of whom men and women alike say, ‘What’s her story? Why doesn’t she marry?’”—challenges the popular stereotypical image of suffrage activists as dowdy and dull. As well, with her character, Robins suggests direct connections between the “private” experience of the “woman with a secret” and the political agenda of the women’s movement. Although she fits the category of the “woman with a past,” Vida also subverts it by refusing to accept a sense of guilt for her past extramarital affair and abortion. The issue of abortion links the play back to Egerton’s 1894 “Virgin Soil” (Discords),
whose protagonist similarly refused to feel guilty for having aborted a child she was expecting with (in her case) a hated husband. Characteristic of the strides the women’s movement had taken by 1907, in Robins’ suffrage play the issue of abortion is politicized. The character of Vida demonstrates to both her friends and women in the audience how to turn their private experience into political currency.  

Returning to Robins, her earlier heroine Eleanor Gervais internalized her pain and doubts and—through her alcohol addiction—turned them against herself. Vida, on the other hand, openly speaks about her love affair, and—through her frankness—turns a potentially antagonistic situation with the rich heiress Jean into an alliance, winning her over to the suffrage cause. Rather than allowing her past experience to lead to her exclusion from the symbolic system (where the recognized official politics happens), Vida—unlike Eleanor or Hedda Gabler, and unlike Blanche, Katharine, or Mrs. Tours (from Robins’ earlier fictional texts dealing with sexual harassment)—utilizes it to gain a position of a self-determining subject within this system. She refuses to doubt that verbal language belongs as much to her as it belongs to male subjects. And she also challenges the indictment of madness and hysteria, invoked by authorities to silence women who express their discontent. When Geoffrey Stonor, Jean’s fiancé and Vida’s former lover, accuses Vida of “being mad,” she responds: “‘Mad,’ ‘Unsexed.’ These are the words of today. In the Middle Ages men cried out ‘Witch!’ and burnt her—the woman who served no man’s bed or board” (85). In her relation to Jean (and perhaps also to women in the audience), Vida represents a powerful oedipal, rather than the conventional Freudian pre-oedipal, mother-figure. While Jean is introduced to the world of politics by her fiancé, his role as a guide within the public sphere is soon replaced by Vida, who demonstrates to Jean how to manipulate the rules of the symbolic discourse for the women’s cause.

Compared with the play, its novel version, The Convert (1907), traces in more detail Vida’s gradual realization of the paralyzing effects of the feminine ideal and her conversion to the suffrage cause. The scene that describes Vida’s first feelings of uneasiness about hostile representations of suffragettes is significant in its exposure of the sexual politics involved in spectatorship, to which Robins herself was subjected on the stage (and her mother at mental institutions). Vida tries in vain to put an end to the detailed, sexually loaded descriptions of a skirmish between suffragettes and the police at the House of Commons. One moment praising the powers of “feminine beauty,” the next moment the upper-class male speakers are depicted as indulging in voyeuristic descriptions of the half-undressed,
struggling women suffrage activists. “The catniest one of the two,” a young man tells a group of aristocrats, “there she stood like this, her clothes half torn off, her hair down her back, her face the color of a lobster and the crowd jeering at her.”42 Objecting to the direction the talk is taking and expressing her sympathy with the abused women, Vida is typically informed, “It’s never so bad for the lunatic as for the sane people looking on” (59).

The novel depicts Vida’s growing admiration of the suffragettes’ courage to face the crowd’s efforts to humiliate and silence them, and it illustrates the strategies developed by these women to help them maintain their position as speaking subjects at public meetings. One of the novel’s focuses is the heroine’s growing ease with mixed crowds. Although—much like characters in Grand’s The Heavenly Twins—Vida remains from the outset until the end a representative of the privileged class, living a life of luxury in the exclusive world of her London aristocratic friends, her participation in suffrage public meetings brings her into close physical contact with poor people in the streets. From the examples of suffrage activists, who are able to remain in control of their bodies in crowded public meetings, Vida comes to the realization that the dangers supposedly awaiting a woman of her position in mixed crowds and proletariat neighborhoods are exaggerated and—by discouraging women like herself from free movement in the streets and from mingling with people of lower classes—also politically paralyzing.

If Robins as an actress assisted in appropriation of Ibsen’s ambiguous characters into sexualized and hystericized objects (as suggested by Diamond), in her later works, Votes for Women and The Convert, she successfully exposed and critiqued the objectifying strategies used in attempts to reduce female activists and public speakers into mute objects. This play and its novel version culminated Robins’ search for such strategies of women’s self-expression which would grant women voice on the stage and in society without sexualizing and objectifying them in the process. In these texts, which were influenced by her own participation in British women’s suffrage campaigns, Robins also shifted her earlier focus from individual existentialism (which defined her work in the 1890s) and moved toward inviting women to participate in collective politics. She here exposed the intimidation of women public speakers and the enforced separation of women of different classes as two variations of Victorian tactics deployed to keep women in conditions of social isolation and political impairment. Genteel women’s internalized desire for segregation from those outside their own social location, enforced in Grand’s work, is exposed and dis-
missed by Robins’ depictions of suffrage activists as a politically paralyzing conceit. Unlike Egerton’s women characters, who mix with people of various classes and cultures as freely as the suffragettes in *The Convert*, Robins’ activists successfully use this practice for overtly political purposes.

Thus many of the shortcomings of the New Woman narrative strategies I have pointed to in Egerton’s, Grand’s, as well as Robins’ own work in the 1890s—whether it be the essentializing understanding of the experience of womanhood, or the enforcement of politically paralyzing divisions between women of various classes, or the confessional technique of turning a legitimate woman’s concern into a guilty secret rather than political currency—seem to be to some extent overcome in Robins’ later contributions to the suffrage movement.

**ROBINS AS AN ANGLO-AMERICAN CULTURAL NATIONALIST**

As I have acknowledged at the beginning of this chapter, the main challenge that scholars interested in examining Robins face rests in her work’s defiance of attempts at its generalized assessment and classification. While some of Robins’ texts analyzed in the previous section (specifically “The Silver Lotus,” *Votes for Women*, and *The Convert*) seem to reach beyond the New Woman writers’ narrative strategies of adopting the racial hierarchy of the dominant evolutionary discourse and endorsing the colonial project (whether British or Anglo-American) in their effort to legitimize their feminist agenda, in most other texts, Robins does just that.

Although she was born and raised outside of Britain and throughout her life retained her American citizenship, Robins appears to have felt a strong attachment to the English cultural heritage. In *Both Sides of the Curtain*, Robins leaves no doubts about her respect for British cultural artifacts and historical sites, even suggesting that some Anglo-Americans of her generation might perhaps feel more sentimental affections for British culture than the English themselves:

Many an American abroad must have felt as I do, that the English-born accustomed from childhood to look up to, the great Abbey of Westminster, let us say—accepting it with however much love and admiration as part of the English scene—may miss something that, strange as it will sound, the American may inherit. We from overseas had only heard about these marvels, seen the pictures of them in our childhood, met their reflection later in poetry, in history. Then . . . we stand before the great monu-
memented the English past, stirred by an emotion we had never known before. My theory is you have to be an American to feel just that in its fullness. . . . [T]here is something . . . deeper that binds America to England than binds her to any other land. That this at all events was true, I believe we owed less to kings, presidents and politicians, than to poets and artists and their lovers. (30–31)

Recognizing the essential part that English cultural discourse played in reinforcing Britain’s dominance in North America, Robins echoes Matthew Arnold and other Victorian cultural critics who had similarly acknowledged and advocated the potential of English literature and art to promote British upper- and middle-class value systems. Rather than critiquing the political agenda behind the worldwide dissemination of British cultural values and questioning it as a colonizing strategy, Robins commends English writers and artists for their part in this process and seems to be unaware of its detrimental political consequences. Being raised in the United States and steeped in its history of successfully breaking with the British Empire did not prevent Robins from becoming an Anglo-Saxonist patriot invested in, and assisting in reinforcing, English cultural hegemony. Nor did Robins’ American background alienate her from the aristocratic and autocratic values and sensibilities of the upper classes. One of the intended functions of the character of Val’s grandmother in The Open Question seems to be to dissipate the common image among Robins’ English readers of Americans as antipatrician or as being less concerned with questions of class status than people in the old monarchical European countries. There is a sense of pride perceivable in the narrator’s depiction of Sarah Gano’s Southern airs of superiority over lower classes and less established families. The grandmother Gano represents American aristocracy, which, while perhaps not rooted in a long family pedigree, is cultivated by an assumed attitude of self-importance and self-restraint. Robins in this novel strives to portray her own family history—through the story of the Ganos—as based in old patrician traditions and values and to represent herself as a daughter of American aristocracy.

Both Sides of the Curtain as well as other texts by Robins also suggest that she was not oblivious to the anxiety—common among the Anglo-Americans throughout the nineteenth century—over the German settlers’ political and cultural claims. German settlers far from quietly accepted the primacy of English in the United States, and their resistance to the attempts at legislating English as the only official language fostered much hostility among the Anglo-American population. What quite likely also
informed Robins’ perception and representation of Germans was the (already mentioned) growing sense among the British at the fin de siècle of a threat that the expanding German nation and the increasing sway of the Pan-Germanic sentiment posed to the very existence of the British Empire.

In 1886 Germany joined the “Great Powers” in their hunt for colonies around the globe. While Britain at first followed its policy of “splendid isolation” toward Germany, the British grew increasingly anxious as the new imperial rival began constructing a strategic railroad between Berlin and the Persian Gulf, perceived as potentially threatening British interests in India and in Asia generally. More relevant in the context of this present study was the rising rivalry between the two European powers in Latin America. After assisting, in the early nineteenth century, in the overthrowing of the Iberian imperial rule throughout the South American continent, Britain gradually emerged—through coercion, collaboration with native elite, and investment—the major business and political player in that part of the world. By the 1870s, “the railways of Argentina and central Mexico, the public utilities of Buenos Aires, Rio, and Recife, major merchant houses in Chile, Venezuela, and Peru, mines in Brazil and Mexico, later petroleum in Mexico and Venezuela, and banks and insurance companies throughout the continent” were all under British control.44 While never becoming incorporated into Britain’s official empire, the economies and politics of Latin American countries became highly dependent on Great Britain, inspiring historians to refer to the relationship in terms of “informal” or “business” imperialism. However, at the turn of the century, as the importance of textiles (Britain’s main export to Latin America) decreased, the British hegemony in Latin America was being increasingly contested by the United States (in Cuba, Mexico, Columbia, Brazil, and Argentina) and by Germany. By 1914, Alan Knight points out, “Germany had overtaken British commerce in Venezuela and was fast catching up in Chile; German merchants controlled 20 per cent of Brazil’s coffee trade and 60 per cent of her rubber exports; German lager had now supplanted English Bass.”45

While in her writing Robins always sought to strengthen a sense of alliance between British and U.S. cultural and other interests, it should be against the context of the contemporary rivalry between Germany and Britain that we consider the author’s seemingly innocent practice of representing many of her villain characters as German or part German. For instance, the would-be seducer who misleads, emotionally manipulates, and sexually assails Katharine in A Dark Lantern is a German prince. And the ethnic background of Baron de Bach—the Peruvian would-be abduc-
tor of Blanche in *Under the Southern Cross*—is described as a mix of German and Spanish. As I have mentioned, Blanche invents a strategy of self-protection against the Baron’s advances by placing him in a disadvantaged position through her determined use of English. Blanche’s insistence on English as their exclusive means of communication is quite a canny (while perhaps too complaisant) strategy of a woman’s self-defense, but Robins also uses the Baron’s foreign cultural background to locate her protests against men’s sexual intimidations of traveling women conveniently within the context of the imperial competition between the Anglo-American (and British) and German colonial powers. Robins’ criticism of gender relations in non-English cultures and her exaggeration of the Baron’s accent to the point of caricature (“I haf know you two days, yust so long haf I loaf you, and being Peruvian, I must die if I tell you not,” 21) turn the narrative into a confirmation of her readers’ perception of Anglo-American cultural superiority. The author invokes the American standard of women’s independence to portray other cultures as backward, and she attempts to gain legitimacy for women’s emancipation by representing it as an index of Anglo-American cultural advancement.

Robins accentuates the Baron’s “Teutonic” features and uses the narrative to ridicule and dismiss the Nietzschean “blond beast” adored so uncritically by Jean Creyke in *Alan’s Wife* (written during the period when the German threat was not yet as strongly perceived by the British). The Baron likes to emphasize his Castilian mother’s share in his heritage and appears quite distressed that, as the narrator expresses it, “his Teutonic cast betrayed him” (7). He insists that “I am in no thing like Jhermans” (7), but the narrator’s description places him decidedly among the Teutons. “He is German,” Blanche thinks to herself, “making a mental note of his complexion, strangely fair for a yachtsman, the eyes—heavily fringed blue eyes—the full-lipped, sensuous mouth, shapely of its kind, shadowed by a curling blond moustache [sic]” (6). With his combination of (presumably) Hispanic sensuality and Aryan physical features, the Baron invokes an image reminiscent of Nietzsche’s fantasy of the overman—of the restored and restocked Teutonic race, a physically active, uninhibited, sensual people, driven by instincts rather than constrained by moral considerations. Whereas Jean Creyke adored this type in her husband, Blanche, although fascinated, maintains skeptical distance. She studies and analyzes the German Peruvian from a position of assumed intellectual superiority and, in the end, renounces him and his lifestyle, finding her own culture’s model of ascetic morality safer and more comfortable for her as a middle-class Anglo-American woman. Placed in the context of world colonialism and
imperial rivalry among European nations, Robins’ ridicule of the German Peruvian can be seen as her contribution to the British and Anglo-American resistance to the recent German arrival on the global colonial map. Blanche-the-narrator is a patriot who represents her culture as superior to other imperial cultures, validating the legitimacy and supremacy of British and Anglo-American imperial claims.

Blanche is unabashedly racist in her objectifying dissection of her new cultural object-toy. As she says to her companion, Mrs. Steele:

“I look upon the Baron de Bach as a kind of blessed invention for my entertainment on this trip . . . he is so unlike all the other men I have known I can’t judge him by any previous standard. I have the same interest in him Uncle John had in the new variety of anthropoid ape in the Zoo at home. I study his possibilities, I starve him, I feed him, I poke him, just to see what he’ll do.” (123–24)

Robins here once again uses her favorite method of turning the analytical interpretive gaze of the Victorian scientific authorities back on the male subject, though the subversive potential of this reversal seems here undermined by the fact that it is the spontaneous and temperamental German Peruvian—rather than a more typical Victorian male authority figure—who becomes the object of Blanche’s dissecting analysis. Through her heroine’s scientific gaze, Robins appropriates the figure of the Nietzschean “blond beast” into an under-rather than overman. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra challenged the reader thus: “What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And a man shall be just that for the overman.”

Robins in her narrative reverses the direction of the laughter—her chaste and ascetic woman allows herself to be entertained by, and ridicules and laughs at, the Teuton. The author gains her middle-class reader’s approval for Blanche in her masculine role of explorer/interpreter/analyzer by placing her on the side of the coldly rational and ascetic English Philistine. Even so, in the end, Blanche is chastised in the narrative for trespassing into male territory (similar to Dr. Theobald’s mother in “The Mirkwater,” who was censured for her embodiment of the male role of examiner-prosecutor) when her toy-the-Baron turns against her, almost succeeding in his scheme of kidnapping her. While Blanche ultimately manages to shake the Baron off, she and Robins’ women readers learn a lesson about possible dangers that physically disadvantaged women face in taking on the role of the explorer.

Descriptions of the Central American landscape and people in this
travel book are also firmly located within the project of European imperialism, with Blanche and Mrs. Steele reading the “Conquest of Mexico” during their journey and watching the scenery through the eyes of its author, an early European colonizer. Robins represents the native people and their customs conventionally—from the ethnocentric perspective of a Western traveler—as barbaric and primitive, though also fascinating. The scenes portrayed here range from pictures of precivilized innocence and virginity, invoking nostalgia on the part of the “civilized” women travelers, to descriptions of the native people’s presumed “barbarism” and idleness, judged against the Anglo-American middle-class utilitarian standard. The description of Mexicans in Mazatlan are somewhat reminiscent of Grand’s portrayal of “Maltese ruffians”: “We land at a rude wharf in the low sea wall,” Blanche narrates, “and pass through groups of dark-skinned natives who eye us with sleepy interest” (41). And people in another Mexican town that Blanche’s company visits are portrayed as “dark visaged idlers lounging on the long seats about the garden” (56). Similar descriptions of the native population as idle, unpredictable, or “evil-looking” dominate the narrative.

The book also reinforces the popular assumption that the darker the shade of their skin and the deeper into the South the people live, the less evolved (culturally and even racially) they are. During their travel through Guatemala, the narrator comments thus on the physiognomy of the natives: “These people seem very different from the Mexican Indians. They are blacker, their faces are more flat and stupid” (168). And their children, nude, standing in the doorways of huts, staring, as the narrator says “with still and stupid wonder at the train,” look like “inanimate clay models of a fairer, finer race to come” (167). Robins in this book adopts the popular Victorian ethnocentric practice of judging cultures and races by the standard set up by the white Anglo-Saxonist middle-class customs, traditions, and physiognomy. Their features, the color of their skin, and their domestic customs place the people of Guatemala in an early stage in the history of racial evolution; in fact, their darkness and nudity and their wonder at the train as a sign and instrument of civilization locate them in prehistory. The only function of the natives, as it seems to be considered here, is to happily procreate, play in their huts and mud, and gradually evolve to a higher level of civilization, providing in the meantime a picturesque image for the entertainment of “Western” explorers and travelers and presumably helping European scientists understand their own people’s anthropological development and evolutionary history. This perception of Central America as a prehistoric virgin continent is reinforced by the following and other similar descriptions of the interior landscape:
The world up here is wild and silent; one feels a breathless sense of discovery and is vaguely glad there is no trace of man. No canoe rises the waves save the grey feather-boat of the wild duck, and the majestic circling hawk is the only fisherman.

“It was like this when Cortes saw it!” I say.

“It was like this when God made it!” says Mrs. Steele, under her breath. (177–78)

Similar passages locate Robins’ writing within the tradition of South American travel narratives, which frequently represented the tropics as places of prodigious primal nature, as an untouched and uninhabited paradise, as a storage of the old preindustrial lifestyle, always available for the Westerner in case she or he becomes tired of the industrial world.

Similar to Grand, Robins does not miss an opportunity to espouse to her reader the benefits of being a member of the “civilized” and economically advantaged culture and uses the natives’ economic disadvantage to accentuate the perception of them as childish and primitive. Everywhere Blanche’s traveling party goes, it is instantly surrounded by native people offering their goods. And the Baron’s handfuls of small change—with little value in the “Western” world—have here power to buy endless quantity of souvenirs, to turn begging children from nuisance into objects of entertainment, and generally to transform him into a figure of demigod in the eyes of the native population. If on other occasions the Baron is first of all a representative of a rival cultural empire, who must be ridiculed, when he and Blanche are on shore among the natives, their European education and upbringing provide a connecting point that surpasses their individual cultural differences. The Baron’s assistance becomes welcome to Blanche when she desires to maintain a detached attitude of nonreciprocity in her relation with the Mexicans, who, in their eagerness to barter, encroach on her private space. “The women immediately attack me,” Blanche comments/complains, “with vociferous gibberish, offering me their wares” (169). Her own womanhood does not afford Blanche any point of connection between herself and the women of the native population. Rather, the native women are perceived by Blanche as a threat to her in several ways. They attempt to change their present relationship, in which she figures in her chosen position of a detached observer, into a more reciprocal and physically closer one. Also, their (exoticized) beauty is perceived as a potential threat to her own and other European or Anglo-American women’s sexual powers. When Blanche is watching these women, her gaze mirrors the typical objectifying and appropriating gaze of the “Western” traveler/colonizer:
[We] turn to hear the Indian water-women singing and laughing as they follow the winding, rugged path way up the heights. The red-brown feet and ankles must be as strong as they are shapely; the arms holding aloft the water jars are well moulded and taper finely to the wrist; splendid freedom is in every motion and a grace their fairer sisters have forgotten. I see the admiration in Baron de Bach's face.

“You like that type?” I ask.

“It ees part of dhie landscape,” he answers; “ve like it in dhie picture. Ve put more deeffeerent womans in our hearts and homes.” (105–6)

The native women are portrayed here with some anxiety on the part of the narrator as graceful, sensuous, and seductive, as perhaps more attractive to the white men than their intended wives. Rather than creating a sense of alliance between women from various cultural backgrounds, as Egerton did, the watching Anglo-American and the watched native women are presented here by Robins as rivals competing for white men's gaze and attention. The rivalry the exoticized beauty presents to Blanche and to Robins' women readers might produce some anxiety, but, as they are reminded by the Baron, the existing cultural and racial hierarchy secures their position in white men's homes and their supremacy over subaltern women.

In *Under the Southern Cross*, Robins thus gains legitimacy for herself as a woman travel writer by placing her narrative both within the tradition of women's travel conduct books and within the conventions of the Anglo-American colonial narrative. She reinforces, rather than challenges, her readers' stereotypical assumptions concerning the racial, cultural, and economic hierarchy between the “advanced” and “primitive” nations, and she represents the Anglo race and culture as the pinnacle of evolution, valorizing thus the contemporary claims of British and North American investors in Central American countries. Robins’ travel narrative in the end not only confirms some of the presumed dangers posed to women travelers if they trespass the prescribed traveling etiquette but is also fully complicit with the racist discourse that dominated contemporary English culture.

**CONCLUSION**

Robins’ acting and literary career tells a story of a woman’s development from an existentialist, interested in an individual woman’s struggle for self-determination in a period of a growing impact of biopolitical technologies
of power, into an advocate of feminist collective politics. Both as an actress working in a male-dominated institution, whose acting was interpreted for audiences most commonly by male critics, and as a daughter of a schizophrenic mother whose life conditions depended on male physicians’ diagnoses, Robins became sensitive to ethical issues of interpretation and to the injustice done to women in a society that placed the authority to interpret mostly in the hands of men and the Victorian scientific establishment. Although the authority of biological determinism is usually ultimately reasserted in her texts, the greatest contribution of Robins’ writing lies in its passionate indictment of, and resistance against, the late-Victorian evolutionary science and other technologies of bourgeois state control over women’s lives. Rather than entirely rejecting the Victorian establishment (as Egerton tried to do), Robins chose to work within the existing system. After experiencing the male-dominated institutional gender bias, which threatened her own personal desire for self-determination, Robins became a liberal feminist, working to infiltrate the controlling positions of theatrical and other institutions with women, who—as she believed—would better understand other women’s concerns.

In her writing, Robins insisted on critically bringing to the attention of her readers the common social practices that normalized the intimidation of independent women. Also commendable was her search for ways to assert her women characters’ self-expression and self-determination in a manner that would avoid their misapprehension by established authorities. Robins, however, too often gained legitimacy as a writer by locating her narratives within the same (racially hierarchized) evolutionary discourse that she interrogated and indicted. Most of Robins’ published writing exposes her investment in the maintenance of English (whether British or American) cultural supremacy and her (however reluctant) ultimate complicity with the biological determinism of popular scientific theories, although in some of her work Robins commendably attempted to overcome class and racial hierarchies. Even in the texts that suggest a bond between women across racial or class boundaries, Robins’ concern was with her upper- or middle-class white women characters. They are the ones whose right for self-determination is recognized and advocated in her narratives. Much like Grand, Robins thus created a feminist discourse centered on privileged white women, and she generally affirmed, rather than challenged, the existing evolutionary narrative and the British and U.S. colonial projects.
Amy Levy, c. 1889. Photograph by Montabone.